

Chapter II - OVER THE PRECIPICE

The effect of his words upon the girl were quite different from what he had expected. An American girl would have laughed, knowing that he but joked. This girl did not laugh. Instead her face went white, and she clutched her bosom with her two hands. Her brown eyes peered searchingly into the face of the man.

"Leopold!" she cried in a suppressed voice. "Oh, your majesty, thank God that you are free--and sane!"

Before he could prevent it the girl had seized his hand and pressed it to her lips.

Here was a pretty muddle! Barney Custer swore at himself inwardly for a boorish fool. What in the world had ever prompted him to speak those ridiculous words! And now how was he to unsay them without mortifying this beautiful girl who had just kissed his hand?

She would never forgive that--he was sure of it.

There was but one thing to do, however, and that was to make a clean breast of it. Somehow, he managed to stumble through his explanation of what had prompted him, and when he had finished he saw that the girl was smiling indulgently at him.

"It shall be Mr. Bernard Custer if you wish it so," she said; "but your majesty need fear nothing from Emma von der Tann. Your secret is as safe with me as with yourself, as the name of Von der Tann must assure you."

She looked to see the expression of relief and pleasure that her father's name should have brought to the face of Leopold of Lutha, but when he gave no indication that he had ever before heard the name she sighed and looked puzzled.

"Perhaps," she thought, "he doubts me. Or can it be possible that, after all, his poor mind is gone?"

"I wish," said Barney in a tone of entreaty, "that you would forgive and forget my foolish words, and then let me accompany you to the end of your journey."

"Whither were you bound when I became the means of wrecking your motor car?" asked the girl.

"To the Old Forest," replied Barney.

Now she was positive that she was indeed with the mad king of Lutha, but she had no fear of him, for since childhood she had heard her father scout the idea

that Leopold was mad. For what other purpose would he hasten toward the Old Forest than to take refuge in her father's castle upon the banks of the Tann at the forest's verge?

"Thither was I bound also," she said, "and if you would come there quickly and in safety I can show you a short path across the mountains that my father taught me years ago. It touches the main road but once or twice, and much of the way passes through dense woods and undergrowth where an army might hide."

"Hadn't we better find the nearest town," suggested Barney, "where I can obtain some sort of conveyance to take you home?"

"It would not be safe," said the girl. "Peter of Blentz will have troops out scouring all Lutha about Blentz and the Old Forest until the king is captured."

Barney Custer shook his head despairingly.

"Won't you please believe that I am but a plain American?" he begged.

Upon the bole of a large wayside tree a fresh, new placard stared them in the face. Emma von der Tann pointed at one of the paragraphs.

"Gray eyes, brown hair, and a full reddish-brown beard," she read. "No matter who you may be," she said, "you are safer off the highways of Lutha than on them until you can find and use a razor."

"But I cannot shave until the fifth of November," said Barney.

Again the girl looked quickly into his eyes and again in her mind rose the question that had hovered there once before. Was he indeed, after all, quite sane?

"Then please come with me the safest way to my father's," she urged. "He will know what is best to do."

"He cannot make me shave," insisted Barney.

"Why do you wish not to shave?" asked the girl.

"It is a matter of my honor," he replied. "I had my choice of wearing a green wastebasket bonnet trimmed with red roses for six months, or a beard for twelve. If I shave off the beard before the fifth of November I shall be without honor in the sight of all men or else I shall have to wear the green bonnet. The beard is bad enough, but the bonnet--ugh!"

Emma von der Tann was now quite assured that the poor fellow was indeed quite demented, but she had seen no indications of violence as yet, though when that

too might develop there was no telling. However, he was to her Leopold of Lutha, and her father's house had been loyal to him or his ancestors for three hundred years.

If she must sacrifice her life in the attempt, nevertheless still must she do all within her power to save her king from recapture and to lead him in safety to the castle upon the Tann.

"Come," she said; "we waste time here. Let us make haste, for the way is long. At best we cannot reach Tann by dark."

"I will do anything you wish," replied Barney, "but I shall never forgive myself for having caused you the long and tedious journey that lies before us. It would be perfectly safe to go to the nearest town and secure a rig."

Emma von der Tann had heard that it was always well to humor maniacs and she thought of it now. She would put the scheme to the test.

"The reason that I fear to have you go to the village," she said, "is that I am quite sure they would catch you and shave off your beard."

Barney started to laugh, but when he saw the deep seriousness of the girl's eyes he changed his mind. Then he recalled her rather peculiar insistence that he was a king, and it suddenly occurred to him that he had been foolish not to have guessed the truth before.

"That is so," he agreed; "I guess we had better do as you say," for he had determined that the best way to handle her would be to humor her--he had always heard that that was the proper method for handling the mentally defective. "Where is the--er--ah--sanatorium?" he blurted out at last.

"The what?" she asked. "There is no sanatorium near here, your majesty, unless you refer to the Castle of Blentz."

"Is there no asylum for the insane near by?"

"None that I know of, your majesty."

For a while they moved on in silence, each wondering what the other might do next.

Barney had evolved a plan. He would try and ascertain the location of the institution from which the girl had escaped and then as gently as possible lead her back to it. It was not safe for as beautiful a woman as she to be roaming through the forest in any such manner as this. He wondered what in the world

the authorities at the asylum had been thinking of to permit her to ride out alone in the first place.

"From where did you ride today?" he blurted out suddenly.

"From Tann."

"That is where we are going now?"

"Yes, your majesty."

Barney drew a breath of relief. The way had become suddenly difficult and he took the girl's arm to help her down a rather steep place. At the bottom of the ravine there was a little brook.

"There used to be a fallen log across it here," said the girl. "How in the world am I ever to get across, your majesty?"

"If you call me that again, I shall begin to believe that I am a king," he humored her, "and then, being a king, I presume that it wouldn't be proper for me to carry you across, or would it? Never really having been a king, I do not know."

"I think," replied the girl, "that it would be eminently proper."

She had difficulty in keeping in mind the fact that this handsome, smiling young man was a dangerous maniac, though it was easy to believe that he was the king. In fact, he looked much as she had always pictured Leopold as looking. She had known him as a boy, and there were many paintings and photographs of his ancestors in her father's castle. She saw much resemblance between these and the youngman.

The brook was very narrow, and the girl thought that it took the young man an unreasonably long time to carry her across, though she was forced to admit that she was far from uncomfortable in the strong arms that bore her so easily.

"Why, what are you doing?" she cried presently. "You are not crossing the stream at all. You are walking right up the middle of it!"

She saw his face flush, and then he turned laughing eyes upon her.

"I am looking for a safe landing," he said.

Emma von der Tann did not know whether to be frightened or amused. As her eyes met the clear, gray ones of the man she could not believe that insanity lurked behind that laughing, level gaze of her carrier. She found herself continually forgetting that the man was mad. He had turned toward the bank

now, and a couple of steps carried them to the low sward that fringed the little brooklet. Here he lowered her to the ground.

"Your majesty is very strong," she said. "I should not have expected it after the years of confinement you have suffered."

"Yes," he said, realizing that he must humor her--it was difficult to remember that this lovely girl was insane. "Let me see, now just what was I in prison for? I do not seem to be able to recall it. In Nebraska, they used to hang men for horse stealing; so I am sure it must have been something else not quite so bad. Do you happen to know?"

"When the king, your father, died you were thirteen years old," the girl explained, hoping to reawaken the sleeping mind, "and then your uncle, Prince Peter of Blentz, announced that the shock of your father's death had unbalanced your mind. He shut you up in Blentz then, where you have been for ten years, and he has ruled as regent. Now, my father says, he has recently discovered a plot to take your life so that Peter may become king. But I suppose you learned of that, and because of it you escaped!"

"This Peter person is all-powerful in Lutha?" he asked.

"He controls the army," the girl replied.

"And you really believe that I am the mad king Leopold?"

"You are the king," she said in a convincing manner.

"You are a very brave young lady," he said earnestly. "If all the mad king's subjects were as loyal as you, and as brave, he would not have languished for ten years behind the walls of Blentz."

"I am a Von der Tann," she said proudly, as though that was explanation sufficient to account for any bravery or loyalty.

"Even a Von der Tann might, without dishonor, hesitate to accompany a mad man through the woods," he replied, "especially if she happened to be a very--a very--" He halted, flushing.

"A very what, your majesty?" asked the girl.

"A very young woman," he ended lamely.

Emma von der Tann knew that he had not intended saying that at all. Being a woman, she knew precisely what he had meant to say, and she discovered that she would very much have liked to hear him say it.

"Suppose," said Barney, "that Peter's soldiers run across us--what then?"

"They will take you back to Blentz, your majesty."

"And you?"

"I do not think that they will dare lay hands on me, though it is possible that Peter might do so. He hates my father even more now than he did when the old king lived."

"I wish," said Mr. Custer, "that I had gone down after my guns. Why didn't you tell me, in the first place, that I was a king, and that I might get you in trouble if you were found with me? Why, they may even take me for an emperor or a mikado--who knows? And then look at all the trouble we'd be in."

Which was Barney's way of humoring a maniac.

"And they might even shave off your beautiful beard."

Which was the girl's way.

"Do you think that you would like me better in the green wastebasket hat with the red roses?" asked Barney.

A very sad look came into the girl's eyes. It was pitiful to think that this big, handsome young man, for whose return to the throne all Lutha had prayed for ten long years, was only a silly half-wit. What might he not have accomplished for his people had this terrible misfortune not overtaken him! In every other way he seemed fitted to be the savior of his country. If she could but make him remember!

"Your majesty," she said, "do you not recall the time that your father came upon a state visit to my father's castle? You were a little boy then. He brought you with him. I was a little girl, and we played together. You would not let me call you 'highness,' but insisted that I should always call you Leopold. When I forgot you would accuse me of lese-majeste, and sentence me to--to punishment."

"What was the punishment?" asked Barney, noticing her hesitation and wishing to encourage her in the pretty turn her dementia had taken.

Again the girl hesitated; she hated to say it, but if it would help to recall the past to that poor, dimmed mind, it was her duty.

"Every time I called you 'highness' you made me give you a--a kiss," she almost whispered.

"I hope," said Barney, "that you will be guilty of lese-majeste often."

"We were little children then, your majesty," the girl reminded him.

Had he thought her of sound mind Mr. Custer might have taken advantage of his royal prerogatives on the spot, for the girl's lips were most tempting; but when he remembered the poor, weak mind, tears almost came to his eyes, and there sprang to his heart a great desire to protect and guard this unfortunate child.

"And when I was Crown Prince what were you, way back there in the beautiful days of our childhood?" asked Barney.

"Why, I was what I still am, your majesty," replied the girl. "Princess Emma von der Tann."

So the poor child, beside thinking him a king, thought herself a princess! She certainly was mad. Well, he would humor her.

"Then I should call you 'your highness,' shouldn't I?" he asked.

"You always called me Emma when we were children."

"Very well, then, you shall be Emma and I Leopold. Is it a bargain?"

"The king's will is law," she said.

They had come to a very steep hillside, up which the half-obliterated trail zigzagged toward the crest of a flat-topped hill. Barney went ahead, taking the girl's hand in his to help her, and thus they came to the top, to stand hand in hand, breathing heavily after the stiff climb.

The girl's hair had come loose about her temples and a lock was blowing over her face. Her cheeks were very red and her eyes bright. Barney thought he had never looked upon a lovelier picture. He smiled down into her eyes and she smiled back at him.

"I wished, back there a way," he said, "that that little brook had been as wide as the ocean--now I wish that this little hill had been as high as Mont Blanc."

"You like to climb?" she asked.

"I should like to climb forever--with you," he said seriously.

She looked up at him quickly. A reply was on her lips, but she never uttered it, for at that moment a ruffian in picturesque rags leaped out from behind a near-by bush, confronting them with leveled revolver. He was so close that the muzzle of the weapon almost touched Barney's face. In that the fellow made his mistake.

"You see," said Barney unexcitedly, "that I was right about the brigands after all. What do you want, my man?"

The man's eyes had suddenly gone wide. He stared with open mouth at the young fellow before him. Then a cunning look came into his eyes.

"I want you, your majesty," he said.

"Godfrey!" exclaimed Barney. "Did the whole bunch escape?"

"Quick!" growled the man. "Hold up your hands. The notice made it plain that you would be worth as much dead as alive, and I have no mind to lose you, so do not tempt me to kill you."

Barney's hands went up, but not in the way that the brigand had expected. Instead, one of them seized his weapon and shoved it aside, while with the other Custer planted a blow between his eyes and sent him reeling backward. The two men closed, fighting for possession of the gun. In the scrimmage it was exploded, but a moment later the American succeeded in wresting it from his adversary and hurled it into the ravine.

Striking at one another, the two surged backward and forward at the very edge of the hill, each searching for the other's throat. The girl stood by, watching the battle with wide, frightened eyes. If she could only do something to aid the king!

She saw a loose stone lying at a little distance from the fighters and hastened to procure it. If she could strike the brigand a single good blow on the side of the head, Leopold might easily overpower him. When she had gathered up the rock and turned back toward the two she saw that the man she thought to be the king was not much in the way of needing outside assistance. She could not but marvel at the strength and dexterity of this poor fellow who had spent almost half his life penned within the four walls of a prison. It must be, she thought, the superhuman strength with which maniacs are always credited.

Nevertheless, she hurried toward them with her weapon; but just before she reached them the brigand made a last mad effort to free himself from the fingers that had found his throat. He lunged backward, dragging the other with him. His foot struck upon the root of a tree, and together the two toppled over into the ravine.

As the girl hastened toward the spot where the two had disappeared, she was startled to see three troopers of the palace cavalry headed by an officer break through the trees at a short distance from where the battle had waged. The four men ran rapidly toward her.

"What has happened here?" shouted the officer to Emma von der Tann; and then, as he came closer: "Gott! Can it be possible that it is your highness?"

The girl paid no attention to the officer. Instead, she hurried down the steep embankment toward the underbrush into which the two men had fallen. There was no sound from below, and no movement in the bushes to indicate that a moment before two desperately battling human beings had dropped among them.

The soldiers were close upon the girl's heels, but it was she who first reached the two quiet figures that lay side by side upon the stony ground halfway down the hillside.

When the officer stopped beside her she was sitting on the ground holding the head of one of the combatants in her lap.

A little stream of blood trickled from a wound in the forehead. The officer stooped closer.

"He is dead?" he asked.

"The king is dead," replied the Princess Emma von der Tann, a little sob in her voice.

"The king!" exclaimed the officer; and then, as he bent lower over the white face: "Leopold!"

The girl nodded.

"We were searching for him," said the officer, "when we heard the shot." Then, arising, he removed his cap, saying in a very low voice: "The king is dead. Long live the king!"