

Chapter III - AN ANGRY KING

The soldiers stood behind their officer. None of them had ever seen Leopold of Lutha--he had been but a name to them--they cared nothing for him; but in the presence of death they were awed by the majesty of the king they had never known.

The hands of Emma von der Tann were chafing the wrists of the man whose head rested in her lap.

"Leopold!" she whispered. "Leopold, come back! Mad king you may have been, but still you were king of Lutha--my father's king--my king."

The girl nearly cried out in shocked astonishment as she saw the eyes of the dead king open. But Emma von der Tann was quick-witted. She knew for what purpose the soldiers from the palace were scouring the country.

Had she not thought the king dead she would have cut out her tongue rather than reveal his identity to these soldiers of his great enemy. Now she saw that Leopold lived, and she must undo the harm she had innocently wrought. She bent lower over Barney's face, trying to hide it from the soldiers.

"Go away, please!" she called to them. "Leave me with my dead king. You are Peter's men. You do not care for Leopold, living or dead. Go back to your new king and tell him that this poor young man can never more stand between him and the throne."

The officer hesitated.

"We shall have to take the king's body with us, your highness," he said.

The officer evidently becoming suspicious, came closer, and as he did so Barney Custer sat up.

"Go away!" cried the girl, for she saw that the king was attempting to speak. "My father's people will carry Leopold of Lutha in state to the capital of his kingdom."

"What's all this row about?" he asked. "Can't you let a dead king alone if the young lady asks you to? What kind of a short sport are you, anyway? Run along, now, and tie yourself outside."

The officer smiled, a trifle maliciously perhaps.

"Ah," he said, "I am very glad indeed that you are not dead, your majesty."

Barney Custer turned his incredulous eyes upon the lieutenant.

"Et tu, Brute?" he cried in anguished accents, letting his head fall back into the girl's lap. He found it very comfortable there indeed.

The officer smiled and shook his head. Then he tapped his forehead meaningly.

"I did not know," he said to the girl, "that he was so bad. But come--it is some distance to Blentz, and the afternoon is already well spent. Your highness will accompany us."

"I?" cried the girl. "You certainly cannot be serious."

"And why not, your highness?" asked the officer. "We had strict orders to arrest not only the king, but any companions who may have been involved in his escape."

"I had nothing whatever to do with his escape," said the girl, "though I should have been only too glad to have aided him had the opportunity presented."

"King Peter may think differently," replied the man.

"The Regent, you mean?" the girl corrected him haughtily.

The officer shrugged his shoulders.

"Regent or King, he is ruler of Lutha nevertheless, and he would take away my commission were I to tell him that I had found a Von der Tann in company with the king and had permitted her to escape. Your blood convicts your highness."

"You are going to take me to Blentz and confine me there?" asked the girl in a very small voice and with wide incredulous eyes. "You would not dare thus to humiliate a Von der Tann?"

"I am very sorry," said the officer, "but I am a soldier, and soldiers must obey their superiors. My orders are strict. You may be thankful," he added, "that it was not Maenck who discovered you."

At the mention of the name the girl shuddered.

"In so far as it is in my power your highness and his majesty will be accorded every consideration of dignity and courtesy while under my escort. You need not entertain any fear of me," he concluded.

Barney Custer, during this, to him, remarkable dialogue, had risen to his feet, and assisted the girl in rising. Now he turned and spoke to the officer.

"This farce," he said, "has gone quite far enough. If it is a joke it is becoming a very sorry one. I am not a king. I am an American--Bernard Custer, of Beatrice, Nebraska, U.S.A. Look at me. Look at me closely. Do I look like a king?"

"Every inch, your majesty," replied the officer.

Barney looked at the man aghast.

"Well, I am not a king," he said at last, "and if you go to arresting me and throwing me into one of your musty old dungeons you will find that I am a whole lot more important than most kings. I'm an American citizen."

"Yes, your majesty," replied the officer, a trifle impatiently. "But we waste time in idle discussion. Will your majesty be so good as to accompany me without resistance?"

"If you will first escort this young lady to a place of safety," replied Barney.

"She will be quite safe at Blentz," said the lieutenant.

Barney turned to look at the girl, a question in his eyes. Before them stood the soldiers with drawn revolvers, and now at the summit of the hill a dozen more appeared in command of a sergeant. They were two against nearly a score, and Barney Custer was unarmed.

The girl shook her head.

"There, is no alternative, I am afraid, your majesty," she said.

Barney wheeled toward the officer.

"Very well, lieutenant," he said, "we will accompany you."

The party turned back up the hillside, leaving the dead bandit where he lay--the fellow's neck had been broken by the fall. A short distance from where the man had confronted them the two prisoners were brought to the main road where they saw still other troopers, and with them the horses of those who had gone into the forest on foot.

Barney and the girl were mounted on two of the animals, the soldiers who had ridden them clambering up behind two of their comrades. A moment later the troop set out along the road which leads to Blentz.

The prisoners rode near the center of the column, surrounded by troopers. For a time they were both silent. Barney was wondering if he had accidentally tumbled

into the private grounds of Lutha's largest madhouse, or if, in reality, these people mistook him for the young king--it seemed incredible.

It had commenced slowly to dawn upon him that perhaps the girl was not crazy after all. Had not the officer addressed her as "your highness"? Now that he thought upon it he recalled that she did have quite a haughty and regal way with her at times, especially so when she had addressed the officer.

Of course she might be mad, after all, and possibly the bandit, too, but it seemed unbelievable that the officer was mad and his entire troop of cavalry should be composed of maniacs, yet they all persisted in speaking and acting as though he were indeed the mad king of Lutha and the young girl at his side a princess.

From pitying the girl he had come to feel a little bit in awe of her. To the best of his knowledge he had never before associated with a real princess. When he recalled that he had treated her as he would an ordinary mortal, and that he had thought her demented, and had tried to humor her mad whims, he felt very foolish indeed.

Presently he turned a sheepish glance in her direction, to find her looking at him. He saw her flush slightly as his eyes met hers.

"Can your highness ever forgive me?" he asked.

"Forgive you!" she cried in astonishment. "For what, your majesty?"

"For thinking you insane, and for getting you into this horrible predicament," he replied. "But especially for thinking you insane."

"Did you think me mad?" she asked in wide-eyed astonishment.

"When you insisted that I was a king, yes," he replied. "But now I begin to believe that it must be I who am mad, after all, or else I bear a remarkable resemblance to Leopold of Lutha."

"You do, your majesty," replied the girl.

Barney saw it was useless to attempt to convince them and so he decided to give up for the time.

"Have me king, if you will," he said, "but please do not call me 'your majesty' any more. It gets on my nerves."

"Your will is law--Leopold," replied the girl, hesitating prettily before the familiar name, "but do not forget your part of the compact."

He smiled at her. A princess wasn't half so terrible after all.

"And your will shall be my law, Emma," he said.

It was almost dark when they came to Blentz. The castle lay far up on the side of a steep hill above the town. It was an ancient pile, but had been maintained in an excellent state of repair. As Barney Custer looked up at the grim towers and mighty, buttressed walls his heart sank. It had taken the mad king ten years to make his escape from that gloomy and forbidding pile!

"Poor child," he murmured, thinking of the girl.

Before the barbican the party was halted by the guard. An officer with a lantern stepped out upon the lowered portcullis. The lieutenant who had captured them rode forward to meet him.

"A detachment of the Royal Horse Guards escorting His Majesty the King, who is returning to Blentz," he said in reply to the officer's sharp challenge.

"The king!" exclaimed the officer. "You have found him?" and he advanced with raised lantern searching for the monarch.

"At last," whispered Barney to the girl at his side, "I shall be vindicated. This man, at least, who is stationed at Blentz must know his king by sight."

The officer came quite close, holding his lantern until the rays fell full in Barney's face. He scrutinized the young man for a moment. There was neither humility nor respect in his manner, so that the American was sure that the fellow had discovered the imposture.

From the bottom of his heart he hoped so. Then the officer swung the lantern until its light shone upon the girl.

"And who's the wench with him?" he asked the officer who had found them.

The man was standing close beside Barney's horse, and the words were scarce out of his mouth when the American slipped from his saddle to the portcullis and struck the officer full in the face.

"She is the Princess von der Tann, you boor," said Barney, "and let that help you remember it in future."

The officer scrambled to his feet, white with rage. Whipping out his sword he rushed at Barney.

"You shall die for that, you half-wit," he cried.

Lieutenant Butzow, he of the Royal Horse, rushed forward to prevent the assault and Emma von der Tann sprang from her saddle and threw herself in front of Barney.

Butzow grasped the other officer's arm.

"Are you mad, Schonau?" he cried. "Would you kill the king?"

The fellow tugged to escape the grasp of Butzow. He was crazed with anger.

"Why not?" he bellowed. "You were a fool not to have done it yourself. Maenck will do it and get a baronetcy. It will mean a captaincy for me at least. Let me at him--no man can strike Karl Schonau and live."

"The king is unarmed," cried Emma von der Tann. "Would you murder him in cold blood?"

"He shall not murder him at all, your highness," said Lieutenant Butzow quietly. "Give me your sword, Lieutenant Schonau. I place you under arrest. What you have just said will not please the Regent when it is reported to him. You should keep your head better when you are angry."

"It is the truth," growled Schonau, regretting that his anger had led him into a disclosure of the plot against the king's life, but like most weak characters fearing to admit himself in error even more than he feared the consequences of his rash words.

"Do you intend taking my sword?" asked Schonau suddenly, turning toward Lieutenant Butzow standing beside him.

"We will forget the whole occurrence, lieutenant," replied Butzow, "if you will promise not to harm his majesty, or offer him or the Princess von der Tann further humiliation. Their position is sufficiently unpleasant without our adding to the degradation of it."

"Very well," grumbled Schonau. "Pass on into the courtyard."

Barney and the girl remounted and the little cavalcade moved forward through the ballium and the great gate into the court beyond.

"Did you notice," said Barney to the princess, "that even he believes me to be the king? I cannot fathom it."

Within the castle they were met by a number of servants and soldiers. An officer escorted them to the great hall, and presently a dark visaged captain of cavalry entered and approached them. Butzow saluted.

"His Majesty, the King," he announced, "has returned to Blentz. In accordance with the commands of the Regent I deliver his august person into your safe keeping, Captain Maenck."

Maenck nodded. He was looking at Barney with evident curiosity.

"Where did you find him?" he asked Butzow.

He made no pretense of according to Barney the faintest indication of the respect that is supposed to be due to those of royal blood. Barney commenced to hope that he had finally come upon one who would know that he was not king.

Butzow recounted the details of the finding of the king. As he spoke, Maenck's eyes, restless and furtive, seemed to be appraising the personal charms of the girl who stood just back of Barney.

The American did not like the appearance of the officer, but he saw that he was evidently supreme at Blentz, and he determined to appeal to him in the hope that the man might believe his story and untangle the ridiculous muddle that a chance resemblance to a fugitive monarch had thrown him and the girl into.

"Captain," said Barney, stepping closer to the officer, "there has been a mistake in identity here. I am not the king. I am an American traveling for pleasure in Lutha. The fact that I have gray eyes and wear a full reddish-brown beard is my only offense. You are doubtless familiar with the king's appearance and so you at least have already seen that I am not his majesty.

"Not being the king, there is no cause to detain me longer, and as I am not a fugitive and never have been, this young lady has been guilty of no misdemeanor or crime in being in my company. Therefore she too should be released. In the name of justice and common decency I am sure that you will liberate us both at once and furnish the Princess von der Tann, at least, with a proper escort to her home."

Maenck listened in silence until Barney had finished, a half smile upon his thick lips.

"I am commencing to believe that you are not so crazy as we have all thought," he said. "Certainly," and he let his eyes rest upon Emma von der Tann, "you are not mentally deficient in so far as your judgment of a good-looking woman is concerned. I could not have made a better selection myself.

"As for my familiarity with your appearance, you know as well as I that I have never seen you before. But that is not necessary--you conform perfectly to the printed description of you with which the kingdom is flooded. Were that not

enough, the fact that you were discovered with old Von der Tann's daughter is sufficient to remove the least doubt as to your identity."

"You are governor of Blentz," cried Barney, "and yet you say that you have never seen the king?"

"Certainly," replied Maenck. "After you escaped the entire personnel of the garrison here was changed, even the old servants to a man were withdrawn and others substituted. You will have difficulty in again escaping, for those who aided you before are no longer here."

"There is no man in the castle of Blentz who has ever seen the king?" asked Barney.

"None who has seen him before tonight," replied Maenck. "But were we in doubt we have the word of the Princess Emma that you are Leopold. Did she not admit it to you, Butzow?"

"When she thought his majesty dead she admitted it," replied Butzow.

"We gain nothing by discussing the matter," said Maenck shortly. "You are Leopold of Lutha. Prince Peter says that you are mad. All that concerns me is that you do not escape again, and you may rest assured that while Ernst Maenck is governor of Blentz you shall not escape and go at large again."

"Are the royal apartments in readiness for his majesty, Dr. Stein?" he concluded, turning toward a rat-faced little man with bushy whiskers, who stood just behind him.

The query was propounded in an ironical tone, and with a manner that made no pretense of concealing the contempt of the speaker for the man he thought the king.

The eyes of the Princess Emma were blazing as she caught the scant respect in Maenck's manner. She looked quickly toward Barney to see if he intended rebuking the man for his impertinence. She saw that the king evidently intended overlooking Maenck's attitude. But Emma von der Tann was of a different mind.

She had seen Maenck several times at social functions in the capital. He had even tried to win a place in her favor, but she had always disliked him, even before the nasty stories of his past life had become common gossip, and within the year she had won his hatred by definitely indicating to him that he was persona non grata, in so far as she was concerned. Now she turned upon him, her eyes flashing with indignation.

"Do you forget, sir, that you address the king?" she cried. "That you are without honor I have heard men say, and I may truly believe it now that I have seen what manner of man you are. The most lowly-bred boor in all Lutha would not be so ungenerous as to take advantage of his king's helplessness to heap indignities upon him.

"Leopold of Lutha shall come into his own some day, and my dearest hope is that his first act may be to mete out to such as you the punishment you deserve."

Maenck paled in anger. His fingers twitched nervously, but he controlled his temper remarkably well, biding his time for revenge.

"Take the king to his apartments, Stein," he commanded curtly, "and you, Lieutenant Butzow, accompany them with a guard, nor leave until you see that he is safely confined. You may return here afterward for my further instructions. In the meantime I wish to examine the king's mistress."

For a moment tense silence reigned in the apartment after Maenck had delivered his wanton insult.

Emma von der Tann, her little chin high in the air, stood straight and haughty, nor was there any sign in her expression to indicate that she had heard the man's words.

Barney was the first to take cognizance of them.

"You cur!" he cried, and took a step toward Maenck. "You're going to eat that, word for word."

Maenck stepped back, his hand upon his sword. Butzow laid a hand upon Barney's arm.

"Don't, your majesty," he implored, "it will but make your position more unpleasant, nor will it add to the safety of the Princess von der Tann for you to strike him now."

Barney shook himself free from Butzow, and before either Stein or the lieutenant could prevent had sprung upon Maenck.

The latter had not been quick enough with his sword, so that Barney had struck him twice, heavily in the face before the officer was able to draw. Butzow had sprung to the king's side, and was attempting to interpose himself between Maenck and the American. In a moment more the sword of the infuriated captain would be in the king's heart. Barney turned the first thrust with his forearm.

"Stop!" cried Butzow to Maenck. "Are you mad, that you would kill the king?"

Maenck lunged again, viciously, at the unprotected body of his antagonist.

"Die, you pig of an idiot!" he screamed.

Butzow saw that the man really meant to murder Leopold. He seized Barney by the shoulder and whirled him backward. At the same instant his own sword leaped from his scabbard, and now Maenck found himself facing grim steel in the hand of a master swordsman.

The governor of Blentz drew back from the touch of that sharp point.

"What do you mean?" he cried. "This is mutiny."

"When I received my commission," replied Butzow, quietly, "I swore to protect the person of the king with my life, and while I live no man shall affront Leopold of Lutha in my presence, or threaten his safety else he accounts to me for his act. Return your sword, Captain Maenck, nor ever again draw it against the king while I be near."

Slowly Maenck sheathed his weapon. Black hatred for Butzow and the man he was protecting smoldered in his eyes.

"If he wishes peace," said Barney, "let him apologize to the princess."

"You had better apologize, captain," counseled Butzow, "for if the king should command me to do so I should have to compel you to," and the lieutenant half drew his sword once more.

There was something in Butzow's voice that warned Maenck that his subordinate would like nothing better than the king's command to run him through.

He well knew the fame of Butzow's sword arm, and having no stomach for an encounter with it he grumbled an apology.

"And don't let it occur again," warned Barney.

"Come," said Dr. Stein, "your majesty should be in your apartments, away from all excitement, if we are to effect a cure, so that you may return to your throne quickly."

Butzow formed the soldiers about the American, and the party moved silently out of the great hall, leaving Captain Maenck and Princess Emma von der Tann its only occupants.

Barney cast a troubled glance toward Maenck, and half hesitated.

"I am sorry, your majesty," said Butzow in a low voice, "but you must accompany us. In this the governor of Blentz is well within his authority, and I must obey him."

"Heaven help her!" murmured Barney.

"The governor will not dare harm her," said Butzow. "Your majesty need entertain no apprehension."

"I wouldn't trust him," replied the American. "I know his kind."