

Chapter IV - BARNEY FINDS A FRIEND

After the party had left the room Maenck stood looking at the princess for several seconds. A cunning expression supplanted the anger that had shown so plainly upon his face but a moment before. The girl had moved to one side of the apartment and was pretending an interest in a large tapestry that covered the wall at that point. Maenck watched her with greedy eyes. Presently he spoke.

"Let us be friends," he said. "You shall be my guest at Blentz for a long time. I doubt if Peter will care to release you soon, for he has no love for your father--and it will be easier for both if we establish pleasant relations from the beginning. What do you say?"

"I shall not be at Blentz long," she replied, not even looking in Maenck's direction, "though while I am it shall be as a prisoner and not as a guest. It is incredible that one could believe me willing to pose as the guest of a traitor, even were he less impossible than the notorious and infamous Captain Maenck."

Maenck smiled. He was one of those who rather pride themselves upon the possession of racy reputations. He walked across the room to a bell cord which he pulled. Then he turned toward the girl again.

"I have given you an opportunity," he said, "to lighten the burdens of your captivity. I hoped that you would be sensible and accept my advances of friendship voluntarily," and he emphasized the word "voluntarily," "but--"

He shrugged his shoulders.

A servant had entered the apartment in response to Maenck's summons.

"Show the Princess von der Tann to her apartments," he commanded with a sinister tone.

The man, who was in the livery of Peter of Blentz, bowed, and with a deferential sign to the girl led the way from the room. Emma von der Tann followed her guide up a winding stairway which spiraled within a tower at the end of a long passage. On the second floor of the castle the servant led her to a large and beautifully furnished suite of three rooms--a bedroom, dressing-room and boudoir. After showing her the rooms that were to be hers the servant left her alone.

As soon as he had gone the Princess von der Tann took another turn through the suite, looking to the doors and windows to ascertain how securely she might barricade herself against unwelcome visitors.

She found that the three rooms lay in an angle of the old, moss-covered castle wall.

The bedroom and dressing-room were connected by a doorway, and each in turn had another door opening into the boudoir. The only connection with the corridor without was through a single doorway from the boudoir. This door was equipped with a massive bolt, which, when she had shot it, gave her a feeling of immense relief and security. The windows were all too high above the court on one side and the moat upon the other to cause her the slightest apprehension of danger from the outside.

The girl found the boudoir not only beautiful, but extremely comfortable and cozy. A huge log-fire blazed upon the hearth, and, though it was summer, its warmth was most welcome, for the night was chill. Across the room from the fireplace a full length oil of a former Blentz princess looked down in arrogance upon the unwilling occupant of the room. It seemed to the girl that there was an expression of annoyance upon the painted countenance that another, and an enemy of her house, should be making free with her belongings. She wondered a little, too, that this huge oil should have been bung in a lady's boudoir. It seemed singularly out of place.

"If she would but smile," thought Emma von der Tann, "she would detract less from the otherwise pleasant surroundings, but I suppose she serves her purpose in some way, whatever it may be."

There were papers, magazines and books upon the center table and more books upon a low tier of shelves on either side of the fireplace. The girl tried to amuse herself by reading, but she found her thoughts continually reverting to the unhappy situation of the king, and her eyes momentarily wandered to the cold and repellent face of the Blentz princess.

Finally she wheeled a great armchair near the fireplace, and with her back toward the portrait made a final attempt to submerge her unhappy thoughts in a current periodical.

When Barney and his escort reached the apartments that had been occupied by the king of Lutha before his escape, Butzow and the soldiers left him in company with Dr. Stein and an old servant, whom the doctor introduced as his new personal attendant.

"Your majesty will find him a very attentive and faithful servant," said Stein. "He will remain with you and administer your medicine at proper intervals."

"Medicine?" ejaculated Barney. "What in the world do I need of medicine? There is nothing the matter with me."

Stein smiled indulgently.

"Ah, your majesty," he said, "if you could but realize the sad affliction that clouds your life! You may never sit upon your throne until the last trace of this sinister mental disorder is eradicated, so take your medicine voluntarily, or otherwise Joseph will be compelled to administer it by force. Remember, sire, that only through this treatment will you be able to leave Blentz."

After Stein had left the room Joseph bolted the door behind him. Then he came to where Barney stood in the center of the apartment, and dropping to his knees took the young man's hand in his and kissed it.

"God has been good indeed, your majesty," he whispered. "It was He who made it possible for old Joseph to deceive them and find his way to your side."

"Who are you, my man?" asked Barney.

"I am from Tann," whispered the old man, in a very low voice. "His highness, the prince, found the means to obtain service for me with the new retinue that has replaced the old which permitted your majesty's escape. There was another from Tann among the former servants here."

"It was through his efforts that you escaped before, you will recall. I have seen Fritz and learned from him the way, so that if your majesty does not recall it it will make no difference, for I know it well, having been over it three times already since I came here, to be sure that when the time came that they should recapture you I might lead you out quickly before they could slay you."

"You really think that they intend murdering me?"

"There is no doubt about it, your majesty," replied the old man. "This very bottle"--Joseph touched the phial which Stein had left upon the table--"contains the means whereby, through my hands, you were to be slowly poisoned."

"Do you know what it is?"

"Bichloride of mercury, your majesty. One dose would have been sufficient, and after a few days--perhaps a week--you would have died in great agony."

Barney shuddered.

"But I am not the king, Joseph," said the young man, "so even had they succeeded in killing me it would have profited them nothing."

Joseph shook his head sadly.

"Your majesty will pardon the presumption of one who loves him," he said, "if he makes so bold as to suggest that your majesty must not again deny that he is king. That only tends to corroborate the contention of Prince Peter that your majesty is not--er, just sane, and so, incompetent to rule Lutha. But we of Tann know differently, and with the help of the good God we will place your majesty upon the throne which Peter has kept from you all these years."

Barney sighed. They were determined that he should be king whether he would or no. He had often thought he would like to be a king; but now the realization of his boyish dreaming which seemed so imminent bade fair to be almost anything than pleasant.

Barney suddenly realized that the old fellow was talking. He was explaining how they might escape. It seemed that a secret passage led from this very chamber to the vaults beneath the castle and from there through a narrow tunnel below the moat to a cave in the hillside far beyond the structure.

"They will not return again tonight to see your majesty," said Joseph, "and so we had best make haste to leave at once. I have a rope and swords in readiness. We shall need the rope to make our way down the hillside, but let us hope that we shall not need the swords."

"I cannot leave Blentz," said Barney, "unless the Princess Emma goes with us."

"The Princess Emma!" cried the old man. "What Princess Emma?"

"Princess von der Tann," replied Barney. "Did you not know that she was captured with me!"

The old man was visibly affected by the knowledge that his young mistress was a prisoner within the walls of Blentz. He seemed torn by conflicting emotions--his duty toward his king and his love for the daughter of his old master. So it was that he seemed much relieved when he found that Barney insisted upon saving the girl before any thought of their own escape should be taken into consideration.

"My first duty, your majesty," said Joseph, "is to bring you safely out of the hands of your enemies, but if you command me to try to bring your betrothed with us I am sure that his highness, Prince Ludwig, would be the last to censure me for deviating thus from his instructions, for if he loves another more than he loves his king it is his daughter, the beautiful Princess Emma."

"What do you mean, Joseph," asked Barney, "by referring to the princess as my betrothed? I never saw her before today."

"It has slipped your majesty's mind," said the old man sadly; "but you and my young mistress were betrothed many years ago while you were yet but children. It was the old king's wish that you wed the daughter of his best friend and most loyal subject."

Here was a pretty pass, indeed, thought Barney. It was sufficiently embarrassing to be mistaken for the king, but to be thrown into this false position in company with a beautiful young woman to whom the king was engaged to be married, and who, with the others, thought him to be the king, was quite the last word in impossible positions.

Following this knowledge there came to Barney the first pangs of regret that he was not really the king, and then the realization, so sudden that it almost took his breath away, that the girl was very beautiful and very much to be desired. He had not thought about the matter until her utter impossibility was forced upon him.

It was decided that Joseph should leave the king's apartment at once and discover in what part of the castle Emma von der Tann was imprisoned. Their further plans were to depend upon the information gained by the old man during his tour of investigation of the castle.

In the interval of his absence Barney paced the length of his prison time and time again. He thought the fellow would never return. Perhaps he had been detected in the act of spying, and was himself a prisoner in some other part of the castle! The thought came to Barney like a blow in the face, for he realized that then he would be entirely at the mercy of his captors, and that there would be none to champion the cause of the Princess von der Tann.

When his nervous tension had about reached the breaking point there came a sound of stealthy movement just outside the door of his room. Barney halted close to the massive panels. He heard a key fitted quietly and then the lock grated as it turned.

Barney thought that they had surely detected Joseph's duplicity and had come to make short work of the king before other traitors arose in their midst entirely to frustrate their plans. The young American stepped to the wall behind the door that he might be out of sight of whoever entered. Should it prove other than Joseph, might the Lord help them! The clenched fists, square-set chin, and gleaming gray eyes of the prisoner presaged no good for any incoming enemy.

Slowly the door swung open and a man entered the room. Barney breathed a deep sigh of relief--it was Joseph.

"Well?" cried the young man from behind him, and Joseph started as though Peter of Blentz himself had laid an accusing finger upon his shoulder. "What news?"

"Your majesty," gasped Joseph, "how you did startle me! I found the apartments of the princess, sire. There is a bare chance that we may succeed in rescuing her, but a very bare one, indeed.

"We must traverse a main corridor of the castle to reach her suite, and then return by the same way. It will be a miracle if we are not discovered; but the worst of it is that next to her apartments, and between them and your majesty's, are the apartments of Captain Maenck.

"He is sure to be there and officers and servants may be coming and going throughout the entire night, for the man is a convivial fellow, sitting at cards and drink until sunrise nearly every day."

"And when we have brought the princess in safety to my quarters," asked Barney, "what then? How shall we conduct her from the castle? You have not told me that as yet."

The old man explained then the plan of escape. It seemed that one of the two huge tile panels that flanked the fireplace on either side was in reality a door hiding the entrance to a shaft that rose from the vaults beneath the castle to the roof. At each floor there was a similar secret door concealing the mouth of the passage. From the vaults a corridor led through another secret panel to the tunnel that wound downward to the cave in the hillside.

"Beyond that we shall find horses, your majesty," concluded the old man. "They have been hidden in the woods since I came to Blentz. Each day I go there to water and feed them."

During the servant's explanation Barney had been casting about in his mind for some means of rescuing the princess without so great risk of detection, and as the plan of the secret passageway became clear to him he thought that he saw a way to accomplish the thing with comparative safety in so far as detection was concerned.

"Who occupies the floor above us, Joseph?" he asked.

"It is vacant," replied the old man.

"Good! Come, show me the entrance to the shaft," directed Barney.

"You will go without attempting to succor the Princess Emma?" exclaimed the old fellow in ill-concealed chagrin.

"Far from it," replied Barney. "Bring your rope and the swords. I think we are going to find the rescuing of the Princess Emma the easiest part of our adventure."

The old man shook his head, but went to another room of the suite, from which he presently emerged with a stout rope about fifty feet in length and two swords. As he buckled one of the weapons to Barney his eyes fell upon the American's seal ring that encircled the third finger of his left hand.

"The Royal Ring of Lutha!" exclaimed Joseph. "Where is it, your majesty? What has become of the Royal Ring of the Kings of Lutha?"

"I'm sure I don't know, Joseph," replied the young man. "Should I be wearing a royal ring?"

"The profaning miscreants!" cried Joseph. "They have dared to filch from you the great ring that has been handed down from king to king for three hundred years. When did they take it from you?"

"I have never seen it, Joseph," replied the young man, "and possibly this fact may assure you where all else has failed that I am no true king of Lutha, after all."

"Ah, no, your majesty," replied the old servitor; "it but makes assurance doubly sure as to your true identity, for the fact that you have not the ring is positive proof that you are king and that they have sought to hide the fact by removing the insignia of your divine right to rule in Lutha."

Barney could not but smile at the old fellow's remarkable logic. He saw that nothing short of a miracle would ever convince Joseph that he was not the real monarch, and so, as matters of greater importance were to the fore, he would have allowed the subject to drop had not the man attempted to recall to the impoverished memory of his king a recollection of the historic and venerated relic of the dead monarchs of Lutha.

"Do you not remember, sir," he asked, "the great ruby that glared, blood-red from its center, and the four sets of golden wings that formed the setting? From the blood of Charlemagne was the ruby made, so history tells us, and the setting represented the protecting wings of the power of the kings of Lutha spread to the four points of the compass. Now your majesty must recall the royal ring, I am sure."

Barney only shook his head, much to Joseph's evident sorrow.

"Never mind the ring, Joseph," said the young man. "Bring your rope and lead me to the floor above."

"The floor above? But, your majesty, we cannot reach the vaults and tunnel by going upward!"

"You forget, Joseph, that we are going to fetch the Princess Emma first."

"But she is not on the floor above us, sire; she is upon the same floor as we are," insisted the old man, hesitating.

"Joseph, who do you think I am?" asked Barney.

"You are the king, my lord," replied the old man.

"Then do as your king commands," said the American sharply.

Joseph turned with dubious mutterings and approached the tiled panel at the left of the fireplace. Here he fumbled about for a moment until his fingers found the hidden catch that held the cunningly devised door in place. An instant later the panel swung inward before his touch, and standing to one side, the old fellow bowed low as he ushered Barney into the Stygian darkness of the space beyond their vision.

Joseph halted the young man just within the doorway, cautioning him against the danger of falling into the shaft, then he closed the panel, and a moment later had found the lantern he had hidden there and lighted it. The rays disclosed to the American the rough masonry of the interior of a narrow, well-built shaft. A rude ladder standing upon a narrow ledge beside him extended upward to lose itself in the shadows above. At its foot the top of another ladder was visible protruding through the opening from the floor beneath.

No sooner had Joseph's lantern shown him the way than Barney was ascending the ladder toward the floor above. At the next landing he waited for the old man.

Joseph put out the light and placed the lantern where they could easily find it upon their return. Then he cautiously slipped the catch that held the panel in place and slowly opened the door until a narrow line of lesser darkness showed from without.

For a moment they stood in silence listening for any sound from the chamber beyond, but as nothing occurred to indicate that the apartment was occupied the old man opened the portal a trifle further, and finally far enough to permit his body to pass through. Barney followed him. They found themselves in a large,

empty chamber, identical in size and shape with that which they had just quitted upon the floor below.

From this the two passed into the corridor beyond, and thence to the apartments at the far end of the wing, directly over those occupied by Emma von der Tann.

Barney hastened to a window overlooking the moat. By leaning far out he could see the light from the princess's chamber shining upon the sill. He wished that the light was not there, for the window was in plain view of the guard on the lookout upon the barbican.

Suddenly he caught the sound of voices from the chamber beneath. For an instant he listened, and then, catching a few words of the dialogue, he turned hurriedly toward his companion.

"The rope, Joseph! And for God's sake be quick about it."