

Chapter V - THE ESCAPE

For half an hour the Princess von der Tann succeeded admirably in immersing herself in the periodical, to the exclusion of her unhappy thoughts and the depressing influence of the austere countenance of the Blentz Princess hanging upon the wall behind her.

But presently she became unaccountably nervous. At the slightest sound from the palace-life on the floor below she would start up with a tremor of excitement. Once she heard footsteps in the corridor before her door, but they passed on, and she thought she discerned the click of a latch a short distance further on along the passageway.

Again she attempted to gather up the thread of the article she had been reading, but she was unsuccessful. A stealthy scratching brought her round quickly, staring in the direction of the great portrait. The girl would have sworn that she had heard a noise within her chamber. She shuddered at the thought that it might have come from that painted thing upon the wall.

What was the matter with her? Was she losing all control of herself to be frightened like a little child by ghostly noises?

She tried to return to her reading, but for the life of her she could not keep her eyes off the silent, painted woman who stared and stared and stared in cold, threatening silence upon this ancient enemy of her house.

Presently the girl's eyes went wide in horror. She could feel the scalp upon her head contract with fright. Her terror-filled gaze was frozen upon that awful figure that loomed so large and sinister above her, for the thing had moved! She had seen it with her own eyes. There could be no mistake--no hallucination of overwrought nerves about it. The Blentz Princess was moving slowly toward her!

Like one in a trance the girl rose from her chair, her eyes glued upon the awful apparition that seemed creeping upon her. Slowly she withdrew toward the opposite side of the chamber. As the painting moved more quickly the truth flashed upon her--it was mounted on a door.

The crack of the door widened and beyond it the girl saw dimly, eyes fastened upon her. With difficulty she restrained a shriek. The portal swung wide and a man in uniform stepped into the room.

It was Maenck.

Emma von der Tann gazed in unveiled abhorrence upon the leering face of the governor of Blentz.

"What means this intrusion?" cried the girl.

"What would you have here?"

"You," replied Maenck.

The girl crimsoned.

Maenck regarded her sneeringly.

"You coward!" she cried. "Leave my apartments at once. Not even Peter of Blentz would countenance such abhorrent treatment of a prisoner."

"You do not know Peter my dear," responded Maenck. "But you need not fear. You shall be my wife. Peter has promised me a baronetcy for the capture of Leopold, and before I am done I shall be made a prince, of that you may rest assured, so you see I am not so bad a match after all."

He crossed over toward her and would have laid a rough hand upon her arm.

The girl sprang away from him, running to the opposite side of the library table at which she had been reading. Maenck started to pursue her, when she seized a heavy, copper bowl that stood upon the table and hurled it full in his face. The missile struck him a glancing blow, but the edge laid open the flesh of one cheek almost to the jaw bone.

With a cry of pain and rage Captain Ernst Maenck leaped across the table full upon the young girl. With vicious, murderous fingers he seized upon her fair throat, shaking her as a terrier might shake a rat. Futilely the girl struck at the hate-contorted features so close to hers.

"Stop!" she cried. "You are killing me."

The fingers released their hold.

"No," muttered the man, and dragged the princess roughly across the room.

Half a dozen steps he had taken when there came a sudden crash of breaking glass from the window across the chamber. Both turned in astonishment to see the figure of a man leap into the room, carrying the shattered crystal and the casement with him. In one hand was a naked sword.

"The king!" cried Emma von der Tann.

"The devil!" muttered Maenck, as, dropping the girl, he scurried toward the great painting from behind which he had found ingress to the chambers of the princess.

Maenck was a coward, and he had seen murder in the eyes of the man rushing upon him. With a bound he reached the picture which still stood swung wide into the room.

Barney was close behind him, but fear lent wings to the governor of Blentz, so that he was able to dart into the passage behind the picture and slam the door behind him a moment before the infuriated man was upon him.

The American clawed at the edge of the massive frame, but all to no avail. Then he raised his sword and slashed the canvas, hoping to find a way into the place beyond, but mighty oaken panels barred his further progress. With a whispered oath he turned back toward the girl.

"Thank Heaven that I was in time, Emma," he cried.

"Oh, Leopold, my king, but at what a price," replied the girl. "He will return now with others and kill you. He is furious--so furious that he scarce knows what he does."

"He seemed to know what he was doing when he ran for that hole in the wall," replied Barney with a grin. "But come, it won't pay to let them find us should they return."

Together they hastened to the window beyond which the girl could see a rope dangling from above. The sight of it partially solved the riddle of the king's almost uncanny presence upon her window sill in the very nick of time.

Below, the lights in the watch tower at the outer gate were plainly visible, and the twinkling of them reminded Barney of the danger of detection from that quarter. Quickly he recrossed the apartment to the wall-switch that operated the recently installed electric lights, and an instant later the chamber was in total darkness.

Once more at the girl's side Barney drew in one end of the rope and made it fast about her body below her arms, leaving a sufficient length terminating in a small loop to permit her to support herself more comfortably with one foot within the noose. Then he stepped to the outer sill, and reaching down assisted her to his side.

Far below them the moonlight played upon the sluggish waters of the moat. In the distance twinkled the lights of the village of Blentz. From the courtyard and

the palace came faintly the sound of voices, and the movement of men. A horse whinnied from the stables.

Barney turned his eyes upward. He could see the head and shoulders of Joseph leaning from the window of the chamber directly above them.

"Hoist away, Joseph!" whispered the American, and to the girl: "Be brave. Shut your eyes and trust to Joseph and--and--"

"And my king," finished the girl for him.

His arm was about her shoulders, supporting her upon the narrow sill. His cheek so close to hers that once he felt the soft velvet of it brush his own. Involuntarily his arm tightened about the supple body.

"My princess!" he murmured, and as he turned his face toward hers their lips almost touched.

Joseph was pulling upon the rope from above. They could feel it tighten beneath the girl's arms. Impulsively Barney Custer drew the sweet lips closer to his own. There was no resistance.

"I love you," he whispered. The words were smothered as their lips met.

Joseph, above, wondered at the great weight of the Princess Emma von der Tann.

"I love you, Leopold, forever," whispered the girl, and then as Joseph's Herculean tugging seemed likely to drag them both from the narrow sill, Barney lifted the girl upward with one hand while he clung to the window frame with the other. The distance to the sill above was short, and a moment later Joseph had grasped the princess's hand and was helping her over the ledge into the room beyond.

At the same instant there came a sudden commotion from the interior of the room in the window of which Barney still stood waiting for Joseph to remove the rope from about the princess and lower it for him. Barney heard the heavy feet of men, the clank of arms, and muttered oaths as the searchers stumbled against the furniture.

Presently one of them found the switch and instantly the room was flooded with light, which revealed to the American a dozen Luthanian troopers headed by the murderous Maenck.

Barney looked anxiously aloft. Would Joseph never lower that rope! Within the room the men were searching. He could hear Maenck directing them. Only a thin portiere screened him from their view. It was but a matter of seconds before they

would investigate the window through which Maenck knew the king had found ingress.

Yes! It had come.

"Look to the window," commanded Maenck. "He may have gone as he came."

Two of the soldiers crossed the room toward the casement. From above Joseph was lowering the rope; but it was too late. The men would be at the window before he could clamber out of their reach.

"Hoist away!" he whispered to Joseph. "Quick now, my man, and make your escape with the Princess von der Tann. It is the king's command."

Already the soldiers were at the window. At the sound of his voice they tore aside the draperies; at the same instant the pseudo-king turned and leaped out into the blackness of the night.

There were exclamations of surprise and rage from the soldiers--a woman's scream. Then from far below came a dull splash as the body of Bernard Custer struck the surface of the moat.

Maenck, leaning from the window, heard the scream and the splash, and jumped to the conclusion that both the king and the princess had attempted to make their escape in this harebrained way. Immediately all the resources at his command were put to the task of searching the moat and the adjacent woods.

He was sure that one or both of the prisoners would be stunned by impact with the surface of the water, and then drowned before they regained consciousness, but he did not know Bernard Custer, nor the facility and almost uncanny ease with which that young man could negotiate a high dive into shallow water.

Nor did he know that upon the floor above him one Joseph was hastening along a dark corridor toward a secret panel in another apartment, and that with him was the Princess Emma bound for liberty and safety far from the frowning walls of Blentz.

As Barney's head emerged above the surface of the moat he shook it vigorously to free his eyes from water, and then struck out for the further bank.

Long before his pursuers had reached the courtyard and alarmed the watch at the barbican, the American had crawled out upon dry land and hastened across the broad clearing to the patch of stunted trees that grew lower down upon the steep hillside before the castle.

He shrank from the thought of leaving Blentz without knowing positively that Joseph had made good the escape of himself and the princess, but he finally argued that even if they had been retaken, he could serve her best by hastening to her father and fetching the only succor that might prevail against the strength of Blentz--armed men in sufficient force to storm the ancient fortress.

He had scarcely entered the wood when he heard the sound of the searchers at the moat, and saw the rays of their lanterns flitting hither and thither as they moved back and forth along the bank.

Then the young man turned his face from the castle and set forth across the unfamiliar country in the direction of the Old Forest and the castle Von der Tann.

The memory of the warm lips that had so recently been pressed to his urged him on in the service of the wondrous girl who had come so suddenly into his life, bringing to him the realization of a love that he knew must alter, for happiness or for sorrow, all the balance of his existence, even unto death.

He dreaded the day of reckoning when, at last, she must learn that he was no king. He did not have the temerity to hope that her courage would be equal to the great sacrifice which the acknowledgment of her love for one not of noble blood must entail; but he could not believe that she would cease to love him when she learned the truth.

So the future looked black and cheerless to Barney Custer as he trudged along the rocky, moonlit way. The only bright spot was the realization that for a while at least he might be serving the one woman in all the world.

All the balance of the long night the young man traversed valley and mountain, holding due south in the direction he supposed the Old Forest to lie. He passed many a little farm tucked away in the hollow of a hillside, and quaint hamlets, and now and then the ruins of an ancient feudal stronghold, but no great forest of black oaks loomed before him to apprise him of the nearness of his goal, nor did he dare to ask the correct route at any of the homes he passed.

His fatal likeness to the description of the mad king of Lutha warned him from intercourse with the men of Lutha until he might know which were friends and which enemies of the hapless monarch.

Dawn found him still upon his way, but with the determination fully crystallized to hail the first man he met and ask the way to Tann. He still avoided the main traveled roads, but from time to time he paralleled them close enough that he might have ample opportunity to hail the first passerby.

The road was becoming more and more mountainous and difficult. There were fewer homes and no hamlets, and now he began to despair entirely of meeting any who could give him direction unless he turned and retraced his steps to the nearest farm.

Directly before him the narrow trail he had been following for the past few miles wound sharply about the shoulder of a protruding cliff. He would see what lay beyond the turn--perhaps he would find the Old Forest there, after all.

But instead he found something very different, though in its way quite as interesting, for as he rounded the rugged bluff he came face to face with two evil-looking fellows astride stocky, rough-coated ponies.

At sight of him they drew in their mounts and eyed him suspiciously. Nor was there great cause for wonderment in that, for the American presented aught but a respectable appearance. His khaki motoring suit, soaked from immersion in the moat, had but partially dried upon him. Mud from the banks of the stagnant pool caked his legs to the knees, almost hiding his once tan puttees. More mud streaked his jacket front and stained its sleeves to the elbows. He was bare-headed, for his cap had remained in the moat at Blentz, and his disheveled hair was tousled upon his head, while his full beard had dried into a weird and tangled fringe about his face. At his side still hung the sword that Joseph had buckled there, and it was this that caused the two men the greatest suspicion of this strange looking character.

They continued to eye Barney in silence, every now and then casting apprehensive glances beyond him, as though expecting others of his kind to appear in the trail at his back. And that is precisely what they did fear, for the sword at Barney's side had convinced them that he must be an officer of the army, and they looked to see his command following in his wake.

The young man saluted them pleasantly, asking the direction to the Old Forest. They thought it strange that a soldier of Lutha should not know his own way about his native land, and so judged that his question was but a blind to deceive them.

"Why do you not ask your own men the way?" parried one of the fellows.

"I have no men, I am alone," replied Barney. "I am a stranger in Lutha and have lost my way."

He who had spoken before pointed to the sword at Barney's side.

"Strangers traveling in Lutha do not wear swords," he said. "You are an officer. Why should you desire to conceal the fact from two honest farmers? We have done nothing. Let us go our way."

Barney looked his astonishment at this reply.

"Most certainly, go your way, my friends," he said laughing. "I would not delay you if I could; but before you go please be good enough to tell me how to reach the Old Forest and the ancient castle of the Prince von der Tann."

For a moment the two men whispered together, then the spokesman turned to Barney.

"We will lead you upon the right road. Come," and the two turned their horses, one of them starting slowly back up the trail while the other remained waiting for Barney to pass him.

The American, suspecting nothing, voiced his thanks, and set out after him who had gone before. As he passed the fellow who waited the latter moved in behind him, so that Barney walked between the two. Occasionally the rider at his back turned in his saddle to scan the trail behind, as though still fearful that Barney had been lying to them and that he would discover a company of soldiers charging down upon them.

The trail became more and more difficult as they advanced, until Barney wondered how the little horses clung to the steep mountainside, where he himself had difficulty in walking without using his hand to keep from falling.

Twice the American attempted to break through the taciturnity of his guides, but his advances were met with nothing more than sultry grunts or silence, and presently a suspicion began to obtrude itself among his thoughts that possibly these "honest farmers" were something more sinister than they represented themselves to be.

A malign and threatening atmosphere seemed to surround them. Even the cat-like movement of their silent mounts breathed a sinister secrecy, and now, for the first time, Barney noticed the short, ugly looking carbines that were slung in boots at their saddle-horns. Then, promoted to further investigation, he dropped back beside the man who had been riding behind him, and as he did so he saw beneath the fellow's cloak the butts of two villainous-looking pistols.

As Barney dropped back beside him the man turned his mount across the narrow trail, and reining him in motioned Barney ahead.

"I have changed my mind," said the American, "about going to the Old Forest."

He had determined that he might as well have the thing out now as later, and discover at once how he stood with these two, and whether or not his suspicions of them were well grounded.

The man ahead had halted at the sound of Barney's voice, and swung about in the saddle.

"What's the trouble?" he asked.

"He don't want to go to the Old Forest," explained his companion, and for the first time Barney saw one of them grin. It was not at all a pleasant grin, nor reassuring.

"He don't, eh?" growled the other. "Well, he ain't goin', is he? Who ever said he was?"

And then he, too, laughed.

"I'm going back the way I came," said Barney, starting around the horse that blocked his way.

"No, you ain't," said the horseman. "You're goin' with us."

And Barney found himself gazing down the muzzle of one of the wicked looking pistols.

For a moment he stood in silence, debating mentally the wisdom of attempting to rush the fellow, and then, with a shake of his head, he turned back up the trail between his captors.

"Yes," he said, "on second thought I have decided to go with you. Your logic is most convincing."