

## Chapter VI - A KING'S RANSOM

For another mile the two brigands conducted their captor along the mountainside, then they turned into a narrow ravine near the summit of the hills--a deep, rocky, wooded ravine into whose black shadows it seemed the sun might never penetrate.

A winding path led crookedly among the pines that grew thickly in this sheltered hollow, until presently, after half an hour of rough going, they came upon a small natural clearing, rock-bound and impregnable.

As they filed from the wood Barney saw a score of villainous fellows clustered about a camp fire where they seemed engaged in cooking their noonday meal. Bits of meat were roasting upon iron skewers, and a great iron pot boiled vigorously at one side of the blaze.

At the sound of their approach the men sprang to their feet in alarm, and as many weapons as there were men leaped to view; but when they saw Barney's companions they returned their pistols to their holsters, and at sight of Barney they pressed forward to inspect the prisoner.

"Who have we here?" shouted a big blond giant, who affected extremely gaudy colors in his selection of wearing apparel, and whose pistols and knife had their grips heavily ornamented with pearl and silver.

"A stranger in Lutha he calls himself," replied one of Barney's captors. "But from the sword I take it he is one of old Peter's wolfhounds."

"Well, he's found the wolves at any rate," replied the giant, with a wide grin at his witticism. "And if Yellow Franz is the particular wolf you're after, my friend, why here I am," he concluded, addressing the American with a leer.

"I'm after no one," replied Barney. "I tell you I'm a stranger, and I lost my way in your infernal mountains. All I wish is to be set upon the right road to Tann, and if you will do that for me you shall be well paid for your trouble."

The giant, Yellow Franz, had come quite close to Barney and was inspecting him with an expression of considerable interest. Presently he drew a soiled and much-folded paper from his breast. Upon one side was a printed notice, and at the corners bits were torn away as though the paper had once been tacked upon wood, and then torn down without removing the tacks.

At sight of it Barney's heart sank. The look of the thing was all too familiar. Before the yellow one had commenced to read aloud from it Barney had repeated to himself the words he knew were coming.

"Gray eyes," read the brigand, "brown hair, and a full, reddish-brown beard.' Herman and Friedrich, my dear children, you have stumbled upon the richest haul in all Lutha. Down upon your marrow-bones, you swine, and rub your low-born noses in the dirt before your king."

The others looked their surprise.

"The king?" one cried.

"Behold!" cried Yellow Franz. "Leopold of Lutha!"

He waved a ham-like hand toward Barney.

Among the rough men was a young smooth-faced boy, and now with wide eyes he pressed forward to get a nearer view of the wonderful person of a king.

"Take a good look at him, Rudolph," cried Yellow Franz. "It is the first and will probably be the last time you will ever see a king. Kings seldom visit the court of their fellow monarch, Yellow Franz of the Black Mountains.

"Come, my children, remove his majesty's sword, lest he fall and stick himself upon it, and then prepare the royal chamber, seeing to it that it be made so comfortable that Leopold will remain with us a long time. Rudolph, fetch food and water for his majesty, and see to it that the silver plates and the golden goblets are well scoured and polished up."

They conducted Barney to a miserable lean-to shack at one side of the clearing, and for a while the motley crew loitered about bandying coarse jests at the expense of the "king." The boy, Rudolph, brought food and water, he alone of them all evincing the slightest respect or awe for the royalty of their unwilling guest.

After a time the men tired of the sport of king-baiting, for Barney showed neither rancor nor outraged majesty at their keenest thrusts, instead, often joining in the laugh with them at his own expense. They thought it odd that the king should hold his dignity in so low esteem, but that he was king they never doubted, attributing his denials to a disposition to deceive them, and rob them of the "king's ransom" they had already commenced to consider as their own.

Shortly after Barney arrived at the rendezvous he saw a messenger dispatched by Yellow Franz, and from the repeated gestures toward himself that had

accompanied the giant's instructions to his emissary, Barney was positive that the man's errand had to do with him.

After the men had left his prison, leaving the boy standing awkwardly in wide-eyed contemplation of his august charge, the American ventured to open a conversation with his youthful keeper.

"Aren't you rather young to be starting in the bandit business, Rudolph?" asked Barney, who had taken a fancy to the youth.

"I do not want to be a bandit, your majesty," whispered the lad; "but my father owes Yellow Franz a great sum of money, and as he could not pay the debt Yellow Franz stole me from my home and says that he will keep me until my father pays him, and that if he does not pay he will make a bandit of me, and that then some day I shall be caught and hanged until I am dead."

"Can't you escape?" asked the young man. "It would seem to me that there would be many opportunities for you to get away undetected."

"There are, but I dare not. Yellow Franz says that if I run away he will be sure to come across me some day again and that then he will kill me."

Barney laughed.

"He is just talking, my boy," he said. "He thinks that by frightening you he will be able to keep you from running away."

"Your majesty does not know him," whispered the youth, shuddering. "He is the wickedest man in all the world. Nothing would please him more than killing me, and he would have done it long since but for two things. One is that I have made myself useful about his camp, doing chores and the like, and the other is that were he to kill me he knows that my father would never pay him."

"How much does your father owe him?"

"Five hundred marks, your majesty," replied Rudolph. "Two hundred of this amount is the original debt, and the balance Yellow Franz has added since he captured me, so that it is really ransom money. But my father is a poor man, so that it will take a long time before he can accumulate so large a sum."

"You would really like to go home again, Rudolph?"

"Oh, very much, your majesty, if I only dared." Barney was silent for some time, thinking. Possibly he could effect his own escape with the connivance of Rudolph, and at the same time free the boy. The paltry ransom he could pay out of his own

pocket and send to Yellow Franz later, so that the youth need not fear the brigand's revenge. It was worth thinking about, at any rate.

"How long do you imagine they will keep me, Rudolph?" he asked after a time.

"Yellow Franz has already sent Herman to Lustadt with a message for Prince Peter, telling him that you are being held for ransom, and demanding the payment of a huge sum for your release. Day after tomorrow or the next day he should return with Prince Peter's reply.

"If it is favorable, arrangements will be made to turn you over to Prince Peter's agents, who will have to come to some distant meeting place with the money. A week, perhaps, it will take, maybe longer."

It was the second day before Herman returned from Lustadt. He rode in just at dark, his pony lathered from hard going.

Barney and the boy saw him coming, and the youth ran forward with the others to learn the news that he had brought; but Yellow Franz and his messenger withdrew to a hut which the brigand chief reserved for his own use, nor would he permit any beside the messenger to accompany him to hear the report.

For half an hour Barney sat alone waiting for word from Yellow Franz that arrangements had been consummated for his release, and then out of the darkness came Rudolph, wide-eyed and trembling.

"Oh, my king?" he whispered. "What shall we do? Peter has refused to ransom you alive, but he has offered a great sum for unquestioned proof of your death. Already he has caused a proclamation to be issued stating that you have been killed by bandits after escaping from Blentz, and ordering a period of national mourning. In three weeks he is to be crowned king of Lutha."

"When do they intend terminating my existence?" queried Barney.

There was a smile upon his lips, for even now he could scarce believe that in the twentieth century there could be any such medieval plotting against a king's life, and yet, on second thought, had he not ample proof of the lengths to which Peter of Blentz was willing to go to obtain the crown of Lutha!

"I do not know, your majesty," replied Rudolph, "when they will do it; but soon, doubtless, since the sooner it is done the sooner they can collect their pay."

Further conversation was interrupted by the sound of footsteps without, and an instant later Yellow Franz entered the squalid apartment and the dim circle of

light which flickered feebly from the smoky lantern that hung suspended from the rafters.

He stopped just within the doorway and stood eyeing the American with an ugly grin upon his vicious face. Then his eyes fell upon the trembling Rudolph.

"Get out of here, you!" he growled. "I've got private business with this king. And see that you don't come nosing round either, or I'll slit that soft throat for you."

Rudolph slipped past the burly ruffian, barely dodging a brutal blow aimed at him by the giant, and escaped into the darkness without.

"And now for you, my fine fellow," said the brigand, turning toward Barney. "Peter says you ain't worth nothing to him--alive, but that your dead body will fetch us a hundred thousand marks."

"Rather cheap for a king, isn't it?" was Barney's only comment.

"That's what Herman tells him," replied Yellow Franz. "But he's a close one, Peter is, and so it was that or nothing."

"When are you going to pull off this little--er--ah--royal demise?" asked Barney.

"If you mean when am I going to kill you," replied the bandit, "why, there ain't no particular rush about it. I'm a tender-hearted chap, I am. I never should have been in this business at all, but here I be, and as there ain't nobody that can do a better job of the kind than me, or do it so painlessly, why I just got to do it myself, and that's all there is to it. But, as I says, there ain't no great rush. If you want to pray, why, go ahead and pray. I'll wait for you."

"I don't remember," said Barney, "when I have met so generous a party as you, my friend. Your self-sacrificing magnanimity quite overpowers me. It reminds me of another unloved Robin Hood whom I once met. It was in front of Burket's coal-yard on Ella Street, back in dear old Beatrice, at some unchristian hour of the night.

"After he had relieved me of a dollar and forty cents he remarked: 'I gotta good mind to kick yer slats in fer not havin' more of de cush on yeh; but I'm feelin' so good about de last guy I stuck up I'll let youse off dis time.'"

"I do not know what you are talking about," replied Yellow Franz; "but if you want to pray you'd better hurry up about it."

He drew his pistol from its holster on the belt at his hips.

Now Barney Custer had no mind to give up the ghost without a struggle; but just how he was to overcome the great beast who confronted him with menacing pistol was, to say the least, not precisely plain. He wished the man would come a little nearer where he might have some chance to close with him before the fellow could fire. To gain time the American assumed a prayerful attitude, but kept one eye on the bandit.

Presently Yellow Franz showed indications of impatience. He fingered the trigger of his weapon, and then slowly raised it on a line with Barney's chest.

"Hadn't you better come closer?" asked the young man. "You might miss at that distance, or just wound me."

Yellow Franz grinned.

"I don't miss," he said, and then: "You're certainly a game one. If it wasn't for the hundred thousand marks, I'd be hanged if I'd kill you."

"The chances are that you will be if you do," said Barney, "so wouldn't you rather take one hundred and fifty thousand marks and let me make my escape?"

Yellow Franz looked at the speaker a moment through narrowed lids.

"Where would you find any one willing to pay that amount for a crazy king?" he asked.

"I have told you that I am not the king," said Barney. "I am an American with a father who would gladly pay that amount on my safe delivery to any American consul."

Yellow Franz shook his head and tapped his brow significantly.

"Even if you was what you are dreaming, it wouldn't pay me," he said.

"I'll make it two hundred thousand," said Barney.

"No--it's a waste of time talking about it. It's worth more than money to me to know that I'll always have this thing on Peter, and that when he's king he won't dare bother me for fear I'll publish the details of this little deal. Come, you must be through praying by this time. I can't wait around here all night." Again Yellow Franz raised his pistol toward Barney's heart.

Before the brigand could pull the trigger, or Barney hurl himself upon his would-be assassin, there was a flash and a loud report from the open window of the shack.

With a groan Yellow Franz crumpled to the dirt floor, and simultaneously Barney was upon him and had wrested the pistol from his hand; but the precaution was unnecessary for Yellow Franz would never again press finger to trigger. He was dead even before Barney reached his side.

In possession of the weapon, the American turned toward the window from which had come the rescuing shot, and as he did so he saw the boy, Rudolph, clambering over the sill, white-faced and trembling. In his hand was a smoking carbine, and on his brow great beads of cold sweat.

"God forgive me!" murmured the youth. "I have killed a man."

"You have killed a dangerous wild beast, Rudolph," said Barney, "and both God and your fellow man will thank and reward you."

"I am glad that I killed him, though," went on the boy, "for he would have killed you, my king, had I not done so. Gladly would I go to the gallows to save my king."

"You are a brave lad, Rudolph," said Barney, "and if ever I get out of the pretty pickle I'm in you'll be well rewarded for your loyalty to Leopold of Lutha. After all," thought the young man, "being a kind has its redeeming features, for if the boy had not thought me his monarch he would never have risked the vengeance of the bloodthirsty brigands in this attempt to save me."

"Hasten, your majesty," whispered the boy, tugging at the sleeve of Barney's jacket. "There is no time to be lost. We must be far away from here when the others discover that Yellow Franz has been killed."

Barney stooped above the dead man, and removing his belt and cartridges transferred them to his own person. Then blowing out the lantern the two slipped out into the darkness of the night.

About the camp fire of the brigands the entire pack was congregated. They were talking together in low voices, ever and anon glancing expectantly toward the shack to which their chief had gone to dispatch the king. It is not every day that a king is murdered, and even these hardened cut-throats felt the spell of awe at the thought of what they believed the sharp report they had heard from the shack portended.

Keeping well to the far side of the clearing, Rudolph led Barney around the group of men and safely into the wood below them. From this point the boy followed the trail which Barney and his captors had traversed two days previously, until he

came to a diverging ravine that led steeply up through the mountains upon their right hand.

In the distance behind them they suddenly heard, faintly, the shouting of men.

"They have discovered Yellow Franz," whispered the boy, shuddering.

"Then they'll be after us directly," said Barney.

"Yes, your majesty," replied Rudolph, "but in the darkness they will not see that we have turned up this ravine, and so they will ride on down the other. I have chosen this way because their horses cannot follow us here, and thus we shall be under no great disadvantage. It may be, however, that we shall have to hide in the mountains for a while, since there will be no place of safety for us between here and Lustadt until after the edge of their anger is dulled."

And such proved to be the case, for try as they would they found it impossible to reach Lustadt without detection by the brigands who patrolled every highway and byway from their rugged mountains to the capital of Lutha.

For nearly three weeks Barney and the boy hid in caves or dense underbrush by day, and by night sought some avenue which would lead them past the vigilant sentries that patrolled the ways to freedom.

Often they were wet by rains, nor were they ever in the warm sunlight for a sufficient length of time to become thoroughly dry and comfortable. Of food they had little, and of the poorest quality.

They dared not light a fire for warmth or cooking, and their light was so miserable that, but for the boy's pitiful terror at the thought of being recaptured by the bandits, Barney would long since have made a break for Lustadt, depending upon their arms and ammunition to carry them safely through were they discovered by their enemies.

Rudolph had contracted a severe cold the first night, and now, it having settled upon his lungs, he had developed a persistent and aggravating cough that caused Barney not a little apprehension. When, after nearly three weeks of suffering and privation, it became clear that the boy's lungs were affected, the American decided to take matters into his own hands and attempt to reach Lustadt and a good doctor; but before he had an opportunity to put his plan into execution the entire matter was removed from his jurisdiction.

It happened like this: After a particularly fatiguing and uncomfortable night spent in attempting to elude the sentinels who blocked their way from the mountains,



daylight found them near a little spring, and here they decided to rest for an hour before resuming their way.

The little pool lay not far from a clump of heavy bushes which would offer them excellent shelter, as it was Barney's intention to go into hiding as soon as they had quenched their thirst at the spring.

Rudolph was coughing pitifully, his slender frame wracked by the convulsion of each new attack. Barney had placed an arm about the boy to support him, for the paroxysms always left him very weak.

The young man's heart went out to the poor boy, and pangs of regret filled his mind as he realized that the child's pathetic condition was the direct result of his self-sacrificing attempt to save his king. Barney felt much like a murderer and a thief, and dreaded the time when the boy should be brought to a realization of his mistake.

He had come to feel a warm affection for the loyal little lad, who had suffered so uncomplainingly and whose every thought had been for the safety and comfort of his king.

Today, thought Barney, I'll take this child through to Lustadt even if every ragged brigand in Lutha lies between us and the capital; but even as he spoke a sudden crashing of underbrush behind caused him to wheel about, and there, not twenty paces from them, stood two of Yellow Franz's cutthroats.

At sight of Barney and the lad they gave voice to a shout of triumph, and raising their carbines fired point-blank at the two fugitives.

But Barney had been equally as quick with his own weapon, and at the moment that they fired he grasped Rudolph and dragged him backward to a great boulder behind which their bodies might be protected from the fire of their enemies.

Both the bullets of the bandits' first volley had been directed at Barney, for it was upon his head that the great price rested. They had missed him by a narrow margin, due, perhaps, to the fact that the mounts of the brigands had been prancing in alarm at the unexpected sight of the two strangers at the very moment that their riders attempted to take aim and fire.

But now they had ridden back into the brush and dismounted, and after hiding their ponies they came creeping out upon their bellies upon opposite sides of Barney's shelter.

The American saw that it would be an easy thing for them to pick him off if he remained where he was, and so with a word to Rudolph he sprang up and the boy

with him. Each delivered a quick shot at the bandit nearest him, and then together they broke for the bushes in which the brigand's mounts were hidden.

Two shots answered theirs. Rudolph, who was ahead of Barney, stumbled and threw up his hands. He would have fallen had not the American thrown a strong arm about him.

"I'm shot, your majesty," murmured the boy, his head dropping against Barney's breast.

With the lad grasped close to him, the young man turned at the edge of the brush to meet the charge of the two ruffians. The wounding of the youth had delayed them just enough to preclude their making this temporary refuge in safety.

As Barney turned both the men fired simultaneously, and both missed. The American raised his revolver, and with the flash of it the foremost brigand came to a sudden stop. An expression of bewilderment crossed his features. He extended his arms straight before him, the revolver slipped from his grasp, and then like a dying top he pivoted once drunkenly and collapsed upon the turf.

At the instant of his fall his companion and the American fired point-blank at one another.

Barney felt a burning sensation in his shoulder, but it was forgotten for the moment in the relief that came to him as he saw the second rascal sprawl headlong upon his face. Then he turned his attention to the limp little figure that hung across his left arm.

Gently Barney laid the boy upon the sward, and fetching water from the pool bathed his face and forced a few drops between the white lips. The cooling draft revived the wounded child, but brought on a paroxysm of coughing. When this had subsided Rudolph raised his eyes to those of the man bending above him.

"Thank God, your majesty is unharmed," he whispered. "Now I can die in peace."

The white lids drooped lower, and with a tired sigh the boy lay quiet. Tears came to the young man's eyes as he let the limp body gently to the ground.

"Brave little heart," he murmured, "you gave up your life in the service of your king as truly as though you had not been all mistaken in the object of your veneration, and if it lies within the power of Barney Custer you shall not have died in vain."