

Chapter VII - THE REAL LEOPOLD

Two hours later a horseman pushed his way between tumbled and tangled briars along the bottom of a deep ravine.

He was hatless, and his stained and ragged khaki betokened much exposure to the elements and hard and continued usage. At his saddle-bow a carbine swung in its boot, and upon either hip was strapped a long revolver. Ammunition in plenty filled the cross belts that he had looped about his shoulders.

Grim and warlike as were his trappings, no less grim was the set of his strong jaw or the glint of his gray eyes, nor did the patch of brown stain that had soaked through the left shoulder of his jacket tend to lessen the martial atmosphere which surrounded him. Fortunate it was for the brigands of the late Yellow Franz that none of them chanced in the path of Barney Custer that day.

For nearly two hours the man had ridden downward out of the high hills in search of a dwelling at which he might ask the way to Tann; but as yet he had passed but a single house, and that a long untenanted ruin. He was wondering what had become of all the inhabitants of Lutha when his horse came to a sudden halt before an obstacle which entirely blocked the narrow trail at the bottom of the ravine.

As the horseman's eyes fell upon the thing they went wide in astonishment, for it was no less than the charred remnants of the once beautiful gray roadster that had brought him into this twentieth century land of medieval adventure and intrigue. Barney saw that the machine had been lifted from where it had fallen across the horse of the Princess von der Tann, for the animal's decaying carcass now lay entirely clear of it; but why this should have been done, or by whom, the young man could not imagine.

A glance aloft showed him the road far above him, from which he, the horse and the roadster had catapulted; and with the sight of it there flashed to his mind the fair face of the young girl in whose service the thing had happened. Barney wondered if Joseph had been successful in returning her to Tann, and he wondered, too, if she mourned for the man she had thought king--if she would be very angry should she ever learn the truth.

Then there came to the American's mind the figure of the shopkeeper of Tafelberg, and the fellow's evident loyalty to the mad king he had never seen. Here was one who might aid him, thought Barney. He would have the will, at least and with the

thought the young man turned his pony's head diagonally up the steep ravine side.

It was a tough and dangerous struggle to the road above, but at last by dint of strenuous efforts on the part of the sturdy little beast the two finally scrambled over the edge of the road and stood once more upon level footing.

After breathing his mount for a few minutes Barney swung himself into the saddle again and set off toward Tafelberg. He met no one upon the road, nor within the outskirts of the village, and so he came to the door of the shop he sought without attracting attention.

Swinging to the ground he tied the pony to one of the supporting columns of the porch-roof and a moment later had stepped within the shop.

From a back room the shopkeeper presently emerged, and when he saw who it was that stood before him his eyes went wide in consternation.

"In the name of all the saints, your majesty," cried the old fellow, "what has happened? How comes it that you are out of the hospital, and travel-stained as though from a long, hard ride? I cannot understand it, sire."

"Hospital?" queried the young man. "What do you mean, my good fellow? I have been in no hospital."

"You were there only last evening when I inquired after you of the doctor," insisted the shopkeeper, "nor did any there yet suspect your true identity."

"Last evening I was hiding far up in the mountains from Yellow Franz's band of cutthroats," replied Barney. "Tell me what manner of riddle you are propounding."

Then a sudden light of understanding flashed through Barney's mind.

"Man!" he exclaimed. "Tell me--you have found the true king? He is at a hospital in Tafelberg?"

"Yes, your majesty, I have found the true king, and it is so that he was at the Tafelberg sanatorium last evening. It was beside the remnants of your wrecked automobile that two of the men of Tafelberg found you.

"One leg was pinioned beneath the machine which was on fire when they discovered you. They brought you to my shop, which is the first on the road into town, and not guessing your true identity they took my word for it that you were an old acquaintance of mine and without more ado turned you over to my care."

Barney scratched his head in puzzled bewilderment. He began to doubt if he were in truth himself, or, after all, Leopold of Lutha. As no one but himself could, by the wildest stretch of imagination, have been in such a position, he was almost forced to the conclusion that all that had passed since the instant that his car shot over the edge of the road into the ravine had been but the hallucinations of a fever-excited brain, and that for the past three weeks he had been lying in a hospital cot instead of experiencing the strange and inexplicable adventures that he had believed to have befallen him.

But yet the more he thought of it the more ridiculous such a conclusion appeared, for it did not in the least explain the pony tethered without, which he plainly could see from where he stood within the shop, nor did it satisfactorily account for the blotch of blood upon his shoulder from a wound so fresh that the stain still was damp; nor for the sword which Joseph had buckled about his waist within Blentz's forbidding walls; nor for the arms and ammunition he had taken from the dead brigands--all of which he had before him as tangible evidence of the rationality of the past few weeks.

"My friend," said Barney at last, "I cannot wonder that you have mistaken me for the king, since all those I have met within Lutha have leaped to the same error, though not one among them made the slightest pretense of ever having seen his majesty. A ridiculous beard started the trouble, and later a series of happenings, no one of which was particularly remarkable in itself, aggravated it, until but a moment since I myself was almost upon the point of believing that I am the king.

"But, my dear Herr Kramer, I am not the king; and when you have accompanied me to the hospital and seen that your patient still is there, you may be willing to admit that there is some justification for doubt as to my royalty."

The old man shook his head.

"I am not so sure of that," he said, "for he who lies at the hospital, providing you are not he, or he you, maintains as sturdily as do you that he is not Leopold. If one of you, whichever be king--providing that you are not one and the same, and that I be not the only maniac in the sad muddle--if one of you would but trust my loyalty and love for the true king and admit your identity, then I might be of some real service to that one of you who is really Leopold. Herr Gott! My words are as mixed as my poor brain."

"If you will listen to me, Herr Kramer," said Barney, "and believe what I tell you, I shall be able to unscramble your ideas in so far as they pertain to me and my identity. As to the man you say was found beneath my car, and who now lies in the sanatorium of Tafelberg, I cannot say until I have seen and talked with him.

He may be the king and he may not; but if he insists that he is not, I shall be the last to wish a kingship upon him. I know from sad experience the hardships and burdens that the thing entails."

Then Barney narrated carefully and in detail the principal events of his life, from his birth in Beatrice to his coming to Lutha upon pleasure. He showed Herr Kramer his watch with his monogram upon it, his seal ring, and inside the pocket of his coat the label of his tailor, with his own name written beneath it and the date that the garment had been ordered.

When he had completed his narrative the old man shook his head.

"I cannot understand it," he said; "and yet I am almost forced to believe that you are not the king."

"Direct me to the sanatorium," suggested Barney, "and if it be within the range of possibility I shall learn whether the man who lies there is Leopold or another, and if he be the king I shall serve him as loyally as you would have served me. Together we may assist him to gain the safety of Tann and the protection of old Prince Ludwig."

"If you are not the king," said Kramer suspiciously, "why should you be so interested in aiding Leopold? You may even be an enemy. How can I know?"

"You cannot know, my good friend," replied Barney. "But had I been an enemy, how much more easily might I have encompassed my designs, whatever they might have been, had I encouraged you to believe that I was king. The fact that I did not, must assure you that I have no ulterior designs against Leopold."

This line of reasoning proved quite convincing to the old shopkeeper, and at last he consented to lead Barney to the sanatorium. Together they traversed the quiet village streets to the outskirts of the town, where in large, park-like grounds the well-known sanatorium of Tafelberg is situated in quiet surroundings. It is an institution for the treatment of nervous diseases to which patients are brought from all parts of Europe, and is doubtless Lutha's principal claim upon the attention of the outer world.

As the two crossed the gardens which lay between the gate and the main entrance and mounted the broad steps leading to the veranda an old servant opened the door, and recognizing Herr Kramer, nodded pleasantly to him.

"Your patient seems much brighter this morning, Herr Kramer," he said, "and has been asking to be allowed to sit up."

"He is still here, then?" questioned the shopkeeper with a sigh that might have indicated either relief or resignation.

"Why, certainly. You did not expect that he had entirely recovered overnight, did you?"

"No," replied Herr Kramer, "not exactly. In fact, I did not know what I should expect."

As the two passed him on their way to the room in which the patient lay, the servant eyed Herr Kramer in surprise, as though wondering what had occurred to his mentality since he had seen him the previous day. He paid no attention to Barney other than to bow to him as he passed, but there was another who did--an attendant standing in the hallway through which the two men walked toward the private room where one of them expected to find the real mad king of Lutha.

He was a dark-visaged fellow, sallow and small-eyed; and as his glance rested upon the features of the American a puzzled expression crossed his face. He let his gaze follow the two as they moved on up the corridor until they turned in at the door of the room they sought, then he followed them, entering an apartment next to that in which Herr Kramer's patient lay.

As Barney and the shopkeeper entered the small, whitewashed room, the former saw upon the narrow iron cot the figure of a man of about his own height. The face that turned toward them as they entered was covered by a full, reddish-brown beard, and the eyes that looked up at them in troubled surprise were gray. Beyond these Barney could see no likenesses to himself; yet they were sufficient, he realized, to have deceived any who might have compared one solely to the printed description of the other.

At the doorway Kramer halted, motioning Barney within.

"It will be better if you talk with him alone," he said. "I am sure that before both of us he will admit nothing."

Barney nodded, and the shopkeeper of Tafelberg withdrew and closed the door behind him. The American approached the bedside with a cheery "Good morning."

The man returned the salutation with a slight inclination of his head. There was a questioning look in his eyes; but dominating that was a pitiful, hunted expression that touched the American's heart.

The man's left hand lay upon the coverlet. Barney glanced at the third finger. About it was a plain gold band. There was no royal ring of the kings of Lutha in

evidence, yet that was no indication that the man was not Leopold; for were he the king and desirous of concealing his identity, his first act would be to remove every symbol of his kingship.

Barney took the hand in his.

"They tell me that you are well on the road to recovery," he said. "I am very glad that it is so."

"Who are you?" asked the man.

"I am Bernard Custer, an American. You were found beneath my car at the bottom of a ravine. I feel that I owe you full reparation for the injuries you received, though it is beyond me how you happened to be found under the machine. Unless I am truly mad, I was the only occupant of the roadster when it plunged over the embankment."

"It is very simple," replied the man upon the cot. "I chanced to be at the bottom of the ravine at the time and the car fell upon me."

"What were you doing at the bottom of the ravine?" asked Barney quite suddenly, after the manner of one who administers a third degree.

The man started and flushed with suspicion.

"That is my own affair," he said.

He tried to disengage his hand from Barney's, and as he did so the American felt something within the fingers of the other. For an instant his own fingers tightened upon those that lay within them, so that as the others were withdrawn his index finger pressed close upon the thing that had aroused his curiosity.

It was a large setting turned inward upon the third finger of the left hand. The gold band that Barney had seen was but the opposite side of the same ring.

A quick look of comprehension came to Barney's eyes. The man upon the cot evidently noted it and rightly interpreted its cause, for, having freed his hand, he now slipped it quickly beneath the coverlet.

"I have passed through a series of rather remarkable adventures since I came to Lutha," said Barney apparently quite irrelevantly, after the two had remained silent for a moment. "Shortly after my car fell upon you I was mistaken for the fugitive King Leopold by the young lady whose horse fell into the ravine with my car. She is a most loyal supporter of the king, being none other than the Princess Emma von der Tann. From her I learned to espouse the cause of Leopold."

Step by step Barney took the man through the adventures that had befallen him during the past three weeks, closing with the story of the death of the boy, Rudolph.

"Above his dead body I swore to serve Leopold of Lutha as loyally as the poor, mistaken child had served me, your majesty," and Barney looked straight into the eyes of him who lay upon the little iron cot.

For a moment the man held his eyes upon those of the American, but finally, under the latter's steady gaze, they dropped and wandered.

"Why do you address me as 'your majesty'?" he asked irritably.

"With my forefinger I felt the ruby and the four wings of the setting of the royal ring of the kings of Lutha upon the third finger of your left hand," replied Barney.

The king started up upon his elbow, his eyes wild with apprehension.

"It is not so," he cried. "It is a lie! I am not the king."

"Hush!" admonished Barney. "You have nothing to fear from me. There are good friends and loyal subjects in plenty to serve and protect your majesty, and place you upon the throne that has been stolen from you. I have sworn to serve you. The old shopkeeper, Herr Kramer, who brought me here, is an honest, loyal old soul. He would die for you, your majesty. Trust us. Let us help you. Tomorrow, Kramer tells me, Peter of Blentz is to have himself crowned as king in the cathedral at Lustadt.

"Will you sit supinely by and see another rob you of your kingdom, and then continue to rob and throttle your subjects as he has been doing for the past ten years? No, you will not. Even if you do not want the crown, you were born to the duties and obligations it entails, and for the sake of your people you must assume them now."

"How am I to know that you are not another of the creatures of that fiend of Blentz?" cried the king. "How am I to know that you will not drag me back to the terrors of that awful castle, and to the poisonous potions of the new physician Peter has employed to assassinate me? I can trust none.

"Go away and leave me. I do not want to be king. I wish only to go away as far from Lutha as I can get and pass the balance of my life in peace and security. Peter may have the crown. He is welcome to it, for all of me. All I ask is my life and my liberty."

Barney saw that while the king was evidently of sound mind, his was not one of those iron characters and courageous hearts that would willingly fight to the death for his own rights and the rights and happiness of his people. Perhaps the long years of bitter disappointment and misery, the tedious hours of imprisonment, and the constant haunting fears for his life had reduced him to this pitiable condition.

Whatever the cause, Barney Custer was determined to overcome the man's aversion to assuming the duties which were rightly his, for in his memory were the words of Emma von der Tann, in which she had made plain to him the fate that would doubtless befall her father and his house were Peter of Blentz to become king of Lutha. Then, too, there was the life of the little peasant boy. Was that to be given up uselessly for a king with so mean a spirit that he would not take a scepter when it was forced upon him?

And the people of Lutha? Were they to be further and continually robbed and downtrodden beneath the heel of Peter's scoundrelly officials because their true king chose to evade the responsibilities that were his by birth?

For half an hour Barney pleaded and argued with the king, until he infused in the weak character of the young man a part of his own tireless enthusiasm and courage. Leopold commenced to take heart and see things in a brighter and more engaging light. Finally he became quite excited about the prospects, and at last Barney obtained a willing promise from him that he would consent to being placed upon his throne and would go to Lustadt at any time that Barney should come for him with a force from the retainers of Prince Ludwig von der Tann.

"Let us hope," cried the king, "that the luck of the reigning house of Lutha has been at last restored. Not since my aunt, the Princess Victoria, ran away with a foreigner has good fortune shone upon my house. It was when my father was still a young man--before he had yet come to the throne--and though his reign was marked with great peace and prosperity for the people of Lutha, his own private fortunes were most unhappy.

"My mother died at my birth, and the last days of my father's life were filled with suffering from the cancer that was slowly killing him. Let us pray, Herr Custer, that you have brought new life to the fortunes of my house."

"Amen, your majesty," said Barney. "And now I'll be off for Tann--there must not be a moment lost if we are to bring you to Lustadt in time for the coronation. Herr Kramer will watch over you, but as none here guesses your true identity you are safer here than anywhere else in Lutha. Good-bye, your majesty. Be of good heart. We'll have you on the road to Lustadt and the throne tomorrow morning."

After Barney Custer had closed the door of the king's chamber behind him and hurried down the corridor, the door of the room next the king's opened quietly and a dark-visaged fellow, sallow and small-eyed, emerged. Upon his lips was a smile of cunning satisfaction, as he hastened to the office of the medical director and obtained a leave of absence for twenty-four hours.