

## Chapter VIII - THE CORONATION DAY

Toward dusk of the day upon which the mad king of Lutha had been found, a dust-covered horseman reined in before the great gate of the castle of Prince Ludwig von der Tann. The unsettled political conditions which overhung the little kingdom of Lutha were evident in the return to medievalism which the raised portcullis and the armed guard upon the barbican of the ancient feudal fortress revealed. Not for a hundred years before had these things been done other than as a part of the ceremonials of a fete day, or in honor of visiting royalty.

At the challenge from the gate Barney replied that he bore a message for the prince. Slowly the portcullis sank into position across the moat and an officer advanced to meet the rider.

"The prince has ridden to Lustadt with a large retinue," he said, "to attend the coronation of Peter of Blentz tomorrow."

"Prince Ludwig von der Tann has gone to attend the coronation of Peter!" cried Barney in amazement. "Has the Princess Emma returned from her captivity in the castle of Blentz?"

"She is with her father now, having returned nearly three weeks ago," replied the officer, "and Peter has disclaimed responsibility for the outrage, promising that those responsible shall be punished. He has convinced Prince Ludwig that Leopold is dead, and for the sake of Lutha--to save her from civil strife--my prince has patched a truce with Peter; though unless I mistake the character of the latter and the temper of the former it will be short-lived.

"To demonstrate to the people," continued the officer, "that Prince Ludwig and Peter are good friends, the great Von der Tann will attend the coronation, but that he takes little stock in the sincerity of the Prince of Blentz would be apparent could the latter have a peep beneath the cloaks and look into the loyal hearts of the men of Tann who rode down to Lustadt today."

Barney did not wait to hear more. He was glad that in the gathering dusk the officer had not seen his face plainly enough to mistake him for the king. With a parting, "Then I must ride to Lustadt with my message for the prince," he wheeled his tired mount and trotted down the steep trail from Tann toward the highway which leads to the capital.

All night Barney rode. Three times he wandered from the way and was forced to stop at farmhouses to inquire the proper direction; but darkness hid his features

from the sleepy eyes of those who answered his summons, and daylight found him still forging ahead in the direction of the capital of Lutha.

The American was sunk in unhappy meditation as his weary little mount plodded slowly along the dusty road. For hours the man had not been able to urge the beast out of a walk. The loss of time consequent upon his having followed wrong roads during the night and the exhaustion of the pony which retarded his speed to what seemed little better than a snail's pace seemed to assure the failure of his mission, for at best he could not reach Lustadt before noon.

There was no possibility of bringing Leopold to his capital in time for the coronation, and but a bare possibility that Prince Ludwig would accept the word of an entire stranger that Leopold lived, for the acknowledgment of such a condition by the old prince could result in nothing less than an immediate resort to arms by the two factions. It was certain that Peter would be infinitely more anxious to proceed with his coronation should it be rumored that Leopold lived, and equally certain that Prince Ludwig would interpose every obstacle, even to armed resistance, to prevent the consummation of the ceremony.

Yet there seemed to Barney no other alternative than to place before the king's one powerful friend the information that he had. It would then rest with Ludwig to do what he thought advisable.

An hour from Lustadt the road wound through a dense forest, whose pleasant shade was a grateful relief to both horse and rider from the hot sun beneath which they had been journeying the greater part of the morning. Barney was still lost in thought, his eyes bent forward, when at a sudden turning of the road he came face to face with a troop of horse that were entering the main highway at this point from an unfrequented byroad.

At sight of them the American instinctively wheeled his mount in an effort to escape, but at a command from an officer a half dozen troopers spurred after him, their fresh horses soon overtaking his jaded pony.

For a moment Barney contemplated resistance, for these were troopers of the Royal Horse, the body which was now Peter's most effective personal tool; but even as his hand slipped to the butt of one of the revolvers at his hip, the young man saw the foolish futility of such a course, and with a shrug and a smile he drew rein and turned to face the advancing soldiers.

As he did so the officer rode up, and at sight of Barney's face gave an exclamation of astonishment. The officer was Butzow.

"Well met, your majesty," he cried saluting. "We are riding to the coronation. We shall be just in time."

"To see Peter of Blentz rob Leopold of a crown," said the American in a disgusted tone.

"To see Leopold of Lutha come into his own, your majesty. Long live the king!" cried the officer.

Barney thought the man either poking fun at him because he was not the king, or, thinking he was Leopold, taking a mean advantage of his helplessness to bait him. Yet this last suspicion seemed unfair to Butzow, who at Blentz had given ample evidence that he was a gentleman, and of far different caliber from Maenck and the others who served Peter.

If he could but convince the man that he was no king and thus gain his liberty long enough to reach Prince Ludwig's ear, his mission would have been served in so far as it lay in his power to serve it. For some minutes Barney expended his best eloquence and logic upon the cavalry officer in an effort to convince him that he was not Leopold.

The king had given the American his great ring to safeguard for him until it should be less dangerous for Leopold to wear it, and for fear that at the last moment someone within the sanatorium might recognize it and bear word to Peter of the king's whereabouts. Barney had worn it turned in upon the third finger of his left hand, and now he slipped it surreptitiously into his breeches pocket lest Butzow should see it and by it be convinced that Barney was indeed Leopold.

"Never mind who you are," cried Butzow, thinking to humor the king's strange obsession. "You look enough like Leopold to be his twin, and you must help us save Lutha from Peter of Blentz."

The American showed in his expression the surprise he felt at these words from an officer of the prince regent.

"You wonder at my change of heart?" asked Butzow.

"How can I do otherwise?"

"I cannot blame you," said the officer. "Yet I think that when you know the truth you will see that I have done only that which I believed to be the duty of a patriotic officer and a true gentleman."

They had rejoined the troop by this time, and the entire company was once more headed toward Lustadt. Butzow had commanded one of the troopers to exchange horses with Barney, bringing the jaded animal into the city slowly, and now freshly mounted the American was making better time toward his destination. His spirits rose, and as they galloped along the highway, he listened with renewed interest to the story which Lieutenant Butzow narrated in detail.

It seemed that Butzow had been absent from Lutha for a number of years as military attache to the Luthanian legation at a foreign court. He had known nothing of the true condition at home until his return, when he saw such scoundrels as Coblich, Maenck, and Stein high in the favor of the prince regent. For some time before the events that had transpired after he had brought Barney and the Princess Emma to Blentz he had commenced to have his doubts as to the true patriotism of Peter of Blentz; and when he had learned through the unguarded words of Schonau that there was a real foundation for the rumor that the regent had plotted the assassination of the king his suspicions had crystallized into knowledge, and he had sworn to serve his king before all others--were he sane or mad. From this loyalty he could not be shaken.

"And what do you intend doing now?" asked Barney.

"I intend placing you upon the throne of your ancestors, sire," replied Butzow; "nor will Peter of Blentz dare the wrath of the people by attempting to interpose any obstacle. When he sees Leopold of Lutha ride into the capital of his kingdom at the head of even so small a force as ours he will know that the end of his own power is at hand, for he is not such a fool that he does not perfectly realize that he is the most cordially hated man in all Lutha, and that only those attend upon him who hope to profit through his success or who fear his evil nature."

"If Peter is crowned today," asked Barney, "will it prevent Leopold regaining his throne?"

"It is difficult to say," replied Butzow; "but the chances are that the throne would be lost to him forever. To regain it he would have to plunge Lutha into a bitter civil war, for once Peter is proclaimed king he will have the law upon his side, and with the resources of the State behind him--the treasury and the army--he will feel in no mood to relinquish the scepter without a struggle. I doubt much that you will ever sit upon your throne, sire, unless you do so within the very next hour."

For some time Barney rode in silence. He saw that only by a master stroke could the crown be saved for the true king. Was it worth it? The man was happier without a crown. Barney had come to believe that no man lived who could be

happy in possession of one. Then there came before his mind's eye the delicate, patrician face of Emma von der Tann.

Would Peter of Blentz be true to his new promises to the house of Von der Tann? Barney doubted it. He recalled all that it might mean of danger and suffering to the girl whose kisses he still felt upon his lips as though it had been but now that hers had placed them there. He recalled the limp little body of the boy, Rudolph, and the Spartan loyalty with which the little fellow had given his life in the service of the man he had thought king. The pitiful figure of the fear-haunted man upon the iron cot at Tafelberg rose before him and cried for vengeance.

To this man was the woman he loved betrothed! He knew that he might never wed the Princess Emma. Even were she not promised to another, the iron shackles of convention and age-old customs must forever separate her from an untitled American. But if he couldn't have her he still could serve her!

"For her sake," he muttered.

"Did your majesty speak?" asked Butzow.

"Yes, lieutenant. We urge greater haste, for if we are to be crowned today we have no time to lose."

Butzow smiled a relieved smile. The king had at last regained his senses!

Within the ancient cathedral at Lustadt a great and gorgeously attired assemblage had congregated. All the nobles of Lutha were gathered there with their wives, their children, and their retainers. There were the newer nobility of the lowlands--many whose patents dated but since the regency of Peter--and there were the proud nobility of the highlands--the old nobility of which Prince Ludwig von der Tann was the chief.

It was noticeable that though a truce had been made between Ludwig and Peter, yet the former chancellor of the kingdom did not stand upon the chancel with the other dignitaries of the State and court.

Few there were who knew that he had been invited to occupy a place of honor there, and had replied that he would take no active part in the making of any king in Lutha whose veins did not pulse to the flow of the blood of the house in whose service he had grown gray.

Close packed were the retainers of the old prince so that their great number was scarcely noticeable, though quite so was the fact that they kept their cloaks on, presenting a somber appearance in the midst of all the glitter of gold and gleam of

jewels that surrounded them--a grim, business-like appearance that cast a chill upon Peter of Blentz as his eyes scanned the multitude of faces below him.

He would have shown his indignation at this seeming affront had he dared; but until the crown was safely upon his head and the royal scepter in his hand Peter had no mind to do aught that might jeopardize the attainment of the power he had sought for the past ten years.

The solemn ceremony was all but completed; the Bishop of Lustadt had received the great golden crown from the purple cushion upon which it had been borne at the head of the procession which accompanied Peter up the broad center aisle of the cathedral. He had raised it above the head of the prince regent, and was repeating the solemn words which precede the placing of the golden circlet upon the man's brow. In another moment Peter of Blentz would be proclaimed the king of Lutha.

By her father's side stood Emma von der Tann. Upon her haughty, high-bred face there was no sign of the emotions which ran riot within her fair bosom. In the act that she was witnessing she saw the eventual ruin of her father's house. That Peter would long want for an excuse to break and humble his ancient enemy she did not believe; but this was not the only cause for the sorrow that overwhelmed her.

Her most poignant grief, like that of her father, was for the dead king, Leopold; but to the sorrow of the loyal subject was added the grief of the loving woman, bereft. Close to her heart she hugged the memory of the brief hours spent with the man whom she had been taught since childhood to look upon as her future husband, but for whom the all-consuming fires of love had only been fanned to life within her since that moment, now three weeks gone, that he had crushed her to his breast to cover her lips with kisses for the short moment ere he sacrificed his life to save her from a fate worse than death.

Before her stood the Nemesis of her dead king. The last act of the hideous crime against the man she had loved was nearing its close. As the crown, poised over the head of Peter of Blentz, sank slowly downward the girl felt that she could scarce restrain her desire to shriek aloud a protest against the wicked act--the crowning of a murderer king of her beloved Lutha.

A glance at the old man at her side showed her the stern, commanding features of her sire molded in an expression of haughty dignity; only the slight movement of the muscles of the strong jaw revealed the tensivity of the hidden emotions of the stern old warrior. He was meeting disappointment and defeat as a Von der Tann should--brave to the end.

The crown had all but touched the head of Peter of Blentz when a sudden commotion at the back of the cathedral caused the bishop to look up in ill-concealed annoyance. At the sight that met his eyes his hands halted in mid-air.

The great audience turned as one toward the doors at the end of the long central aisle. There, through the wide-swung portals, they saw mounted men forcing their way into the cathedral. The great horses shouldered aside the foot-soldiers that attempted to bar their way, and twenty troopers of the Royal Horse thundered to the very foot of the chancel steps.

At their head rode Lieutenant Butzow and a tall young man in soiled and tattered khaki, whose gray eyes and full reddish-brown beard brought an exclamation from Captain Maenck who commanded the guard about Peter of Blentz.

"Mein Gott--the king!" cried Maenck, and at the words Peter went white.

In open-mouthed astonishment the spectators saw the hurrying troopers and heard Butzow's "The king! The king! Make way for Leopold, King of Lutha!"

And a girl saw, and as she saw her heart leaped to her mouth. Her small hand gripped the sleeve of her father's coat. "The king, father," she cried. "It is the king."

Old Von der Tann, the light of a new hope firing his eyes, threw aside his cloak and leaped to the chancel steps beside Butzow and the others who were mounting them. Behind him a hundred cloaks dropped from the shoulders of his fighting men, exposing not silks and satins and fine velvet, but the coarse tan of khaki, and grim cartridge belts well filled, and stern revolvers slung to well-worn service belts.

As Butzow and Barney stepped upon the chancel Peter of Blentz leaped forward. "What mad treason is this?" he fairly screamed.

"The days of treason are now past, prince," replied Butzow meaningly. "Here is not treason, but Leopold of Lutha come to claim his crown which he inherited from his father."

"It is a plot," cried Peter, "to place an impostor upon the throne! This man is not the king."

For a moment there was silence. The people had not taken sides as yet. They awaited a leader. Old Von der Tann scrutinized the American closely.

"How may we know that you are Leopold?" he asked. "For ten years we have not seen our king."

"The governor of Blentz has already acknowledged his identity," cried Butzow. "Maenck was the first to proclaim the presence of the putative king."

At that someone near the chancel cried: "Long live Leopold, king of Lutha!" and at the words the whole assemblage raised their voices in a tumultuous: "Long live the king!"

Peter of Blentz turned toward Maenck. "The guard!" he cried. "Arrest those traitors, and restore order in the cathedral. Let the coronation proceed."

Maenck took a step toward Barney and Butzow, when old Prince von der Tann interposed his giant frame with grim resolve.

"Hold!" He spoke in a low, stern voice that brought the cowardly Maenck to a sudden halt.

The men of Tann had pressed eagerly forward until they stood, with bared swords, a solid rank of fighting men in grim semicircle behind their chief. There were cries from different parts of the cathedral of: "Crown Leopold, our true king! Down with Peter! Down with the assassin!"

"Enough of this," cried Peter. "Clear the cathedral!"

He drew his own sword, and with half a hundred loyal retainers at his back pressed forward to clear the chancel. There was a brief fight, from which Barney, much to his disgust, was barred by the mighty figure of the old prince and the stalwart sword-arm of Butzow. He did get one crack at Maenck, and had the satisfaction of seeing blood spurt from a flesh wound across the fellow's cheek.

"That for the Princess Emma," he called to the governor of Blentz, and then men crowded between them and he did not see the captain again during the battle.

When Peter saw that more than half of the palace guard were shouting for Leopold, and fighting side by side with the men of Tann, he realized the futility of further armed resistance at this time. Slowly he withdrew, and at last the fighting ceased and some semblance of order was restored within the cathedral.

Fearfully, the bishop emerged from hiding, his robes disheveled and his miter askew. Butzow grasped him none too reverently by the arm and dragged him before Barney. The crown of Lutha dangled in the priest's palsied hands.

"Crown the king!" cried the lieutenant. "Crown Leopold, king of Lutha!"

A mad roar of acclaim greeted this demand, and again from all parts of the cathedral rose the same wild cry. But in the lull that followed there were some



who demanded proof of the tattered young man who stood before them and claimed that he was king.

"Let Prince Ludwig speak!" cried a dozen voices.

"Yes, Prince Ludwig! Prince Ludwig!" took up the throng.

Prince Ludwig von der Tann turned toward the bearded young man. Silence fell upon the crowded cathedral. Peter of Blentz stood awaiting the outcome, ready to demand the crown upon the first indication of wavering belief in the man he knew was not Leopold.

"How may we know that you are really Leopold?" again asked Ludwig of Barney.

The American raised his left hand, upon the third finger of which gleamed the great ruby of the royal ring of the kings of Lutha. Even Peter of Blentz started back in surprise as his eyes fell upon the ring.

Where had the man come upon it?

Prince von der Tann dropped to one knee before Mr. Bernard Custer of Beatrice, Nebraska, U.S.A., and lifted that gentleman's hand to his lips, and as the people of Lutha saw the act they went mad with joy.

Slowly Prince Ludwig rose and addressed the bishop. "Leopold, the rightful heir to the throne of Lutha, is here. Let the coronation proceed."

The quiet of the sepulcher fell upon the assemblage as the holy man raised the crown above the head of the king. Barney saw from the corner of his eye the sea of faces upturned toward him. He saw the relief and happiness upon the stern countenance of the old prince.

He hated to dash all their new found joy by the announcement that he was not the king. He could not do that, for the moment he did Peter would step forward and demand that his own coronation continue. How was he to save the throne for Leopold?

Among the faces beneath him he suddenly descried that of a beautiful young girl whose eyes, filled with the tears of a great happiness and a greater love, were upturned to his. To reveal his true identity would lose him this girl forever. None save Peter knew that he was not the king. All save Peter would hail him gladly as Leopold of Lutha. How easily he might win a throne and the woman he loved by a moment of seeming passive compliance.

The temptation was great, and then he recalled the boy, lying dead for his king in the desolate mountains, and the pathetic light in the eyes of the sorrowful man at

Tafelberg, and the great trust and confidence in the heart of the woman who had shown that she loved him.

Slowly Barney Custer raised his palm toward the bishop in a gesture of restraint.

"There are those who doubt that I am king," he said. "In these circumstances there should be no coronation in Lutha until all doubts are allayed and all may unite in accepting without question the royal right of the true Leopold to the crown of his father. Let the coronation wait, then, until another day, and all will be well."

"It must take place before noon of the fifth day of November, or not until a year later," said Prince Ludwig. "In the meantime the Prince Regent must continue to rule. For the sake of Lutha the coronation must take place today, your majesty."

"What is the date?" asked Barney.

"The third, sire."

"Let the coronation wait until the fifth."

"But your majesty," interposed Von der Tann, "all may be lost in two days."

"It is the king's command," said Barney quietly.

"But Peter of Blentz will rule for these two days, and in that time with the army at his command there is no telling what he may accomplish," insisted the old man.

"Peter of Blentz shall not rule Lutha for two days, or two minutes," replied Barney. "We shall rule. Lieutenant Butzow, you may place Prince Peter, Coblich, Maenck, and Stein under arrest. We charge them with treason against their king, and conspiring to assassinate their rightful monarch."

Butzow smiled as he turned with his troopers at his back to execute this most welcome of commissions; but in a moment he was again at Barney's side.

"They have fled, your majesty," he said. "Shall I ride to Blentz after them?"

"Let them go," replied the American, and then, with his retinue about him the new king of Lutha passed down the broad aisle of the cathedral of Lustadt and took his way to the royal palace between ranks of saluting soldiery backed by cheering thousands.