

Chapter IX - THE KING'S GUESTS

Once within the palace Barney sought the seclusion of a small room off the audience chamber. Here he summoned Butzow.

"Lieutenant," said the American, "for the sake of a woman, a dead child and an unhappy king I have become dictator of Lutha for forty-eight hours; but at noon upon the fifth this farce must cease. Then we must place the true Leopold upon the throne, or a new dictator must replace me.

"In vain I have tried to convince you that I am not the king, and today in the cathedral so great was the temptation to take advantage of the odd train of circumstances that had placed a crown within my reach that I all but surrendered to it--not for the crown of gold, Butzow, but for an infinitely more sacred diadem which belongs to him to whom by right of birth and lineage, belongs the crown of Lutha. I do not ask you to understand--it is not necessary--but this you must know and believe: that I am not Leopold, and that the true Leopold lies in hiding in the sanatorium at Tafelberg, from which you and I, Butzow, must fetch him to Lustadt before noon on the fifth."

"But, sire--" commenced Butzow, when Barney raised his hand.

"Enough of that, Butzow!" he cried almost irritably. "I am sick of being 'sired' and 'majestied'--my name is Custer. Call me that when others are not present. Believe what you will, but ride with me in secrecy to Tafelberg tonight, and together we shall bring back Leopold of Lutha. Then we may call Prince Ludwig into our confidence, and none need ever know of the substitution.

"I doubt if many had a sufficiently close view of me today to realize the trick that I have played upon them, and if they note a difference they will attribute it to the change in apparel, for we shall see to it that the king is fittingly garbed before we exhibit him to his subjects, while hereafter I shall continue in khaki, which becomes me better than ermine."

Butzow shook his head.

"King or dictator," he said, "it is all the same, and I must obey whatever commands you see fit to give, and so I will ride to Tafelberg tonight, though what we shall find there I cannot imagine, unless there are two Leopolds of Lutha. But shall we also find another royal ring upon the finger of this other king?"

Barney smiled. "You're a typical hard-headed Dutchman, Butzow," he said.

The lieutenant drew himself up haughtily. "I am not a Dutchman, your majesty. I am a Luthanian."

Barney laughed. "Whatever else you may be, Butzow, you're a brick," he said, laying his hand upon the other's arm.

Butzow looked at him narrowly.

"From your speech," he said, "and the occasional Americanisms into which you fall I might believe that you were other than the king but for the ring."

"It is my commission from the king," replied Barney. "Leopold placed it upon my finger in token of his royal authority to act in his behalf. Tonight, then Butzow, you and I shall ride to Tafelberg. Have three good horses. We must lead one for the king."

Butzow saluted and left the apartment. For an hour or two the American was busy with tailors whom he had ordered sent to the palace to measure him for the numerous garments of a royal wardrobe, for he knew the king to be near enough his own size that he might easily wear clothes that had been fitted to Barney; and it was part of his plan to have everything in readiness for the substitution which was to take place the morning of the coronation.

Then there were foreign dignitaries, and the heads of numerous domestic and civic delegations to be given audience. Old Von der Tann stood close behind Barney prompting him upon the royal duties that had fallen so suddenly upon his shoulders, and none thought it strange that he was unfamiliar with the craft of kingship, for was it not common knowledge that he had been kept a close prisoner in Blentz since boyhood, nor been given any coaching for the duties Peter of Blentz never intended he should perform?

After it was all over Prince Ludwig's grim and leathery face relaxed into a smile of satisfaction.

"None who witnessed the conduct of your first audience, sire," he said, "could for a moment doubt your royal lineage--if ever a man was born to kingship, your majesty, it be you."

Barney smiled, a bit ruefully, however, for in his mind's eye he saw a future moment when the proud old Prince von der Tann would know the truth of the imposture that had been played upon him, and the young man foresaw that he would have a rather unpleasant half-hour.

At a little distance from them Barney saw Emma von der Tann surrounded by a group of officials and palace officers. Since he had come to Lustadt that day he

had had no word with her, and now he crossed toward her, amused as the throng parted to form an aisle for him, the men saluting and the women curtsying low.

He took both of the girl's hands in his, and, drawing one through his arm, took advantage of the prerogatives of kingship to lead her away from the throng of courtiers.

"I thought that I should never be done with all the tiresome business which seems to devolve upon kings," he said, laughing. "All the while that I should have been bending my royal intellect to matters of state, I was wondering just how a king might find a way to see the woman he loves without interruptions from the horde that dogs his footsteps."

"You seem to have found a way, Leopold," she whispered, pressing his arm close to her. "Kings usually do."

"It is not because I am a king that I found a way, Emma," he replied. "It is because I am an American."

She looked up at him with an expression of pleading in her eyes.

"Why do you persist?" she cried. "You have come into your own, and there is no longer aught to fear from Peter or any other. To me at least, it is most unkind still to deny your identity."

"I wonder," said Barney, "if your love could withstand the knowledge that I am not the king."

"It is the MAN I love, Leopold," the girl replied.

"You think so now," he said, "but wait until the test comes, and when it does, remember that I have always done my best to undeceive you. I know that you are not for such as I, my princess, and when I have returned your true king to you all that I shall ask is that you be happy with him."

"I shall always be happy with my king," she whispered, and the look that she gave him made Barney Custer curse the fate that had failed to make him a king by birth.

An hour later darkness had fallen upon the little city of Lustadt, and from a small gateway in the rear of the palace grounds two horsemen rode out into the ill-paved street and turned their mounts' heads toward the north. At the side of one trotted a ledhorse.

As they passed beneath the glare of an arc-light before a cafe at the side of the public square, a diner sitting at a table upon the walk spied the tall figure and

the bearded face of him who rode a few feet in advance of his companion. Leaping to his feet the man waved his napkin above his head.

"Long live the king!" he cried. "God save Leopold of Lutha!"

And amid the din of cheering that followed, Barney Custer of Beatrice and Lieutenant Butzow of the Royal Horse rode out into the night upon the road to Tafelberg.

When Peter of Blentz had escaped from the cathedral he had hastily mounted with a handful of his followers and hurried out of Lustadt along the road toward his formidable fortress at Blentz. Half way upon the journey he had met a dusty and travel-stained horseman hastening toward the capital city that Peter and his lieutenants had just left.

At sight of the prince regent the fellow reined in and saluted.

"May I have a word in private with your highness?" he asked. "I have news of the greatest importance for your ears alone."

Peter drew to one side with the man.

"Well," he asked, "and what news have you for Peter of Blentz?"

The man leaned from his horse close to Peter's ear.

"The king is in Tafelberg, your highness," he said.

"The king is dead," snapped Peter. "There is an impostor in the palace at Lustadt. But the real Leopold of Lutha was slain by Yellow Franz's band of brigands weeks ago."

"I heard the man at Tafelberg tell another that he was the king," insisted the fellow. "Through the keyhole of his room I saw him take a great ring from his finger--a ring with a mighty ruby set in its center--and give it to the other. Both were bearded men with gray eyes--either might have passed for the king by the description upon the placards that have covered Lutha for the past month. At first he denied his identity, but when the other had convinced him that he sought only the king's welfare he at last admitted that he was Leopold."

"Where is he now?" cried Peter.

"He is still in the sanatorium at Tafelberg. In room twenty-seven. The other promised to return for him and take him to Lustadt, but when I left Tafelberg he had not yet done so, and if you hasten you may reach there before they take him

away, and if there be any reward for my loyalty to you, prince, my name is Ferrath."

"Ride with us and if you have told the truth, fellow, there shall be a reward and if not--then there shall be deserts," and Peter of Blentz wheeled his horse and with his company galloped on toward Tafelberg.

As he rode he talked with his lieutenants Coblich, Maenck, and Stein, and among them it was decided that it would be best that Peter stop at Blentz for the night while the others rode on to Tafelberg.

"Do not bring Leopold to Blentz," directed Peter, "for if it be he who lies at Tafelberg and they find him gone it will be toward Blentz that they will first look. Take him--"

The Regent leaned from his saddle so that his mouth was close to the ear of Coblich, that none of the troopers might hear.

Coblich nodded his head.

"And, Coblich, the fewer that ride to Tafelberg tonight the surer the success of the mission. Take Maenck, Stein and one other with you. I shall keep this man with me, for it may prove but a plot to lure me to Tafelberg."

Peter scowled at the now frightened hospital attendant.

"Tomorrow I shall be riding through the lowlands, Coblich, and so you may not find means to communicate with me, but before noon of the fifth have word at your town house in Lustadt for me of the success of your venture."

They had reached the point now where the road to Tafelberg branches from that to Blentz, and the four who were to fetch the king wheeled their horses into the left-hand fork and cantered off upon their mission.

The direct road between Lustadt and Tafelberg is but little more than half the distance of that which Coblich and his companions had to traverse because of the wide detour they had made by riding almost to Blentz first, and so it was that when they cantered into the little mountain town near midnight Barney Custer and Lieutenant Butzow were but a mile or two behind them.

Had the latter had even the faintest of suspicions that the identity of the hiding place of the king might come to the knowledge of Peter of Blentz they could have reached Tafelberg ahead of Coblich and his party, but all unsuspecting they rode slowly to conserve the energy of their mounts for the return trip.

In silence the two men approached the grounds surrounding the sanatorium. In the soft dirt of the road the hoofs of their mounts made no sound, and the shadows of the trees that border the front of the enclosure hid them from the view of the trooper who held four riderless horses in a little patch of moonlight that broke through the opening in the trees at the main gate of the institution.

Barney was the first to see the animals and the man.

"S-s-st," he hissed, reining in his horse.

Butzow drew alongside the American.

"What can it mean?" asked Barney. "That fellow is a trooper, but I cannot make out his uniform."

"Wait here," said Butzow, and slipping from his horse he crept closer to the man, hugging the dense shadows close to the trees.

Barney reined in nearer the low wall. From his saddle he could see the grounds beyond through the branches of a tree. As he looked his attention was suddenly riveted upon a sight that sent his heart into his throat.

Three men were dragging a struggling, half-naked figure down the gravel walk from the sanatorium toward the gate. One kept a hand clapped across the mouth of the prisoner, who struck and fought his assailants with all the frenzy of despair.

Barney leaped from his saddle and ran headlong after Butzow. The lieutenant had reached the gate but an instant ahead of him when the trooper, turning suddenly at some slight sound of the officer's foot upon the ground, detected the man creeping upon him. In an instant the fellow had whipped out a revolver, and raising it fired point-blank at Butzow's chest; but in the same instant a figure shot out of the shadows beside him, and with the report of the revolver a heavy fist caught the trooper on the side of the chin, crumpling him to the ground as if he were dead.

The blow had been in time to deflect the muzzle of the firearm, and the bullet whistled harmlessly past the lieutenant.

"Your majesty!" exclaimed Butzow excitedly. "Go back. He might have killed you."

Barney leaped to the other's side and grasping him by the shoulders wheeled him about so that he faced the gate.

"There, Butzow," he cried, "there is your king, and from the looks of it he never needed a loyal subject more than he does this moment. Come!" Without waiting

to see if the other followed him, Barney Custer leaped through the gate full in the faces of the astonished trio that was dragging Leopold of Lutha from his sanctuary.

At sight of the American the king gave a muffled cry of relief, and then Barney was upon those who held him. A stinging uppercut lifted Coblich clear of the ground to drop him, dazed and bewildered, at the foot of the monarch he had outraged. Maenck drew a revolver only to have it struck from his hand by the sword of Butzow, who had followed closely upon the American's heels.

Barney, seizing the king by the arm, started on a run for the gateway. In his wake came Butzow with a drawn sword beating back Stein, who was armed with a cavalry saber, and Maenck who had now drawn his own sword.

The American saw that the two were pressing Butzow much too closely for safety and that Coblich had now recovered from the effects of the blow and was in pursuit, drawing his saber as he ran. Barney thrust the king behind him and turned to face the enemy, at Butzow's side.

The three men rushed upon the two who stood between them and their prey. The moonlight was now full in the faces of Butzow and the American. For the first time Maenck and the others saw who it was that had interrupted them.

"The impostor!" cried the governor of Blentz. "The false king!"

Imbued with temporary courage by the knowledge that his side had the advantage of superior numbers he launched himself full upon the American. To his surprise he met a sword-arm that none might have expected in an American, for Barney Custer had been a pupil of the redoubtable Colonel Monstery, who was, as Barney was wont to say, "one of the thanwhomest of fencing masters."

Quickly Maenck fell back to give place to Stein, but not before the American's point had found him twice to leave him streaming blood from two deep flesh wounds.

Neither of those who fought in the service of the king saw the trembling, weak-kneed figure, which had stood behind them, turn and scurry through the gateway, leaving the men who battled for him to their fate.

The trooper whom Barney had felled had regained consciousness and as he came to his feet rubbing his swollen jaw he saw a disheveled, half-dressed figure running toward him from the sanatorium grounds. The fellow was no fool, and knowing the purpose of the expedition as he did he was quick to jump to the conclusion that this fleeing personification of abject terror was Leopold of Lutha;

and so it was that as the king emerged from the gateway in search of freedom he ran straight into the widespread arms of the trooper.

Maenck and Coblich had seen the king's break for liberty, and the latter maneuvered to get himself between Butzow and the open gate that he might follow after the fleeing monarch.

At the same instant Maenck, seeing that Stein was being worsted by the American, rushed in upon the latter, and thus relieved, the rat-faced doctor was enabled to swing a heavy cut at Barney which struck him a glancing blow upon the head, sending him stunned and bleeding to the sward.

Coblich and the governor of Blentz hastened toward the gate, pausing for an instant to overwhelm Butzow. In the fierce scrimmage that followed the lieutenant was overthrown, though not before his sword had passed through the heart of the rat-faced one. Deserting their fallen comrade the two dashed through the gate, where to their immense relief they found Leopold safe in the hands of the trooper.

An instant later the precious trio, with Leopold upon the horse of the late Dr. Stein, were galloping swiftly into the darkness of the wood that lies at the outskirts of Tafelberg.

When Barney regained consciousness he found himself upon a cot within the sanatorium. Close beside him lay Butzow, and above them stood an interne and several nurses. No sooner had the American regained his scattered wits than he leaped to the floor. The interne and the nurses tried to force him back upon the cot, thinking that he was in the throes of a delirium, and it required his best efforts to convince them that he was quite rational.

During the melee Butzow regained consciousness; his wound being as superficial as that of the American, the two men were soon donning their clothing, and, half-dressed, rushing toward the outer gate.

The interne had told them that when he had reached the scene of the conflict in company with the gardener he had found them and another lying upon the sward.

Their companion, he said, was quite dead.

"That must have been Stein," said Butzow. "And the others had escaped with the king!"

"The king?" cried the interne.

"Yes, the king, man--Leopold of Lutha. Did you not know that he who has lain here for three weeks was the king?" replied Butzow.

The interne accompanied them to the gate and beyond, but everywhere was silence. The king was gone.