

Chapter X - ON THE BATTLEFIELD

All that night and the following day Barney Custer and his aide rode in search of the missing king.

They came to Blentz, and there Butzow rode boldly into the great court, admitted by virtue of the fact that the guard upon the gate knew him only as an officer of the royal guard whom they believed still loyal to Peter of Blentz.

The lieutenant learned that the king was not there, nor had he been since his escape. He also learned that Peter was abroad in the lowland recruiting followers to aid him forcibly to regain the crown of Lutha.

The lieutenant did not wait to hear more, but, hurrying from the castle, rode to Barney where the latter had remained in hiding in the wood below the moat--the same wood through which he had stumbled a few weeks previously after his escape from the stagnant waters of the moat.

"The king is not here," said Butzow to him, as soon as the former reached his side. "Peter is recruiting an army to aid him in seizing the palace at Lustadt, and king or no king, we must ride for the capital in time to check that move. Thank God," he added, "that we shall have a king to place upon the throne of Lutha at noon tomorrow in spite of all that Peter can do."

"What do you mean?" asked Barney. "Have you any clue to the whereabouts of Leopold?"

"I saw the man at Tafelberg whom you say is king," replied Butzow. "I saw him tremble and whimper in the face of danger. I saw him run when he might have seized something, even a stone, and fought at the sides of the men who were come to rescue him. And I saw you there also.

"The truth and the falsity of this whole strange business is beyond me, but this I know: if you are not the king today I pray God that the other may not find his way to Lustadt before noon tomorrow, for by then a brave man will sit upon the throne of Lutha, your majesty."

Barney laid his hand upon the shoulder of the other.

"It cannot be, my friend," he said. "There is more than a throne at stake for me, but to win them both I could not do the thing you suggest. If Leopold of Lutha lives he must be crowned tomorrow."

"And if he does not live?" asked Butzow.

Barney Custer shrugged his shoulders.

It was dusk when the two entered the palace grounds in Lustadt. The sight of Barney threw the servants and functionaries of the royal household into wild excitement and confusion. Men ran hither and thither bearing the glad tidings that the king had returned.

Old von der Tann was announced within ten minutes after Barney reached his apartments. He urged upon the American the necessity for greater caution in the future.

"Your majesty's life is never safe while Peter of Blentz is abroad in Lutha," cried he.

"It was to save your king from Peter that we rode from Lustadt last night," replied Barney, but the old prince did not catch the double meaning of the words.

While they talked a young officer of cavalry begged an audience. He had important news for the king, he said. From him Barney learned that Peter of Blentz had succeeded in recruiting a fair-sized army in the lowlands. Two regiments of government infantry and a squadron of cavalry had united forces with him, for there were those who still accepted him as regent, believing his contention that the true king was dead, and that he whose coronation was to be attempted was but the puppet of old Von der Tann.

The morning of November 5 broke clear and cold. The old town of Lustadt was awakened with a start at daybreak by the booming of cannon. Mounted messengers galloped hither and thither through the steep, winding streets. Troops, foot and horse, moved at the double from the barracks along the King's Road to the fortifications which guard the entrance to the city at the foot of Margaretha Street.

Upon the heights above the town Barney Custer and the old Prince von der Tann stood surrounded by officers and aides watching the advance of a skirmish line up the slopes toward Lustadt. Behind, the thin line columns of troops were marching under cover of two batteries of field artillery that Peter of Blentz had placed upon a wooden knoll to the southeast of the city.

The guns upon the single fort that, overlooking the broad valley, guarded the entire southern exposure of the city were answering the fire of Prince Peter's artillery, while several machine guns had been placed to sweep the slope up which the skirmish line was advancing.

The trees that masked the enemy's pieces extended upward along the ridge and the eastern edge of the city. Barney saw that a force of men might easily reach a commanding position from that direction and enter Lustadt almost in rear of the fortifications. Below him a squadron of the Royal Horse were just emerging from their stables, taking their way toward the plain to join in a concerted movement against the troops that were advancing toward the fort.

He turned to an aide de camp standing just behind him.

"Intercept that squadron and direct the major to move due east along the King's Road to the grove," he commanded. "We will join him there."

And as the officer spurred down the steep and narrow street the American, followed by Von der Tann and his staff, wheeled and galloped eastward.

Ten minutes later the party entered the wood at the edge of town, where the squadron soon joined them. Von der Tann was mystified at the purpose of this change in the position of the general staff, since from the wood they could see nothing of the battle waging upon the slope. During his brief intercourse with the man he thought king he had quite forgotten that there had been any question as to the young man's sanity, for he had given no indication of possessing aught but a well-balanced mind. Now, however, he commenced to have misgivings, if not of his sanity, then as to his judgment at least.

"I fear, your majesty," he ventured, "that we are putting ourselves too much out of touch with the main body of the army. We can neither see nor accomplish anything from this position."

"We were too far away to accomplish much upon the top of that mountain," replied Barney, "but we're going to commence doing things now. You will please to ride back along the King's Road and take direct command of the troops mobilized near the fort.

"Direct the artillery to redouble their fire upon the enemy's battery for five minutes, and then to cease firing into the wood entirely. At the same instant you may order a cautious advance against the troops advancing up the slope.

"When you see us emerge upon the west side of the grove where the enemy's guns are now, you may order a charge, and we will take them simultaneously upon their right flank with a cavalry charge."

"But, your majesty," exclaimed Von der Tann dubiously, "where will you be in the mean time?"

"We shall be with the major's squadron, and when you see us emerging from the grove, you will know that we have taken Peter's guns and that everything is over except the shouting."

"You are not going to accompany the charge!" cried the old prince.

"We are going to lead it," and the pseudo-king of Lutha wheeled his mount as though to indicate that the time for talking was past.

With a signal to the major commanding the squadron of Royal Horse, he moved eastward into the wood. Prince Ludwig hesitated a moment as though to question further the wisdom of the move, but finally with a shake of his head he trotted off in the direction of the fort.

Five minutes later the enemy were delighted to note that the fire upon their concealed battery had suddenly ceased.

Then Peter saw a force of foot-soldiers deploy from the city and advance slowly in line of skirmishers down the slope to meet his own firing line.

Immediately he did what Barney had expected that he would--turned the fire of his artillery toward the southwest, directly away from the point from which the American and the crack squadron were advancing.

So it came that the cavalymen crept through the woods upon the rear of the guns, unseen; the noise of their advance was drowned by the detonation of the cannon.

The first that the artillerymen knew of the enemy in their rear was a shout of warning from one of the powder-men at a caisson, who had caught a glimpse of the grim line advancing through the trees at his rear.

Instantly an effort was made to wheel several of the pieces about and train them upon the advancing horsemen; but even had there been time, a shout that rose from several of Peter's artillerymen as the Royal Horse broke into full view would doubtless have prevented the maneuver, for at sight of the tall, bearded, young man who galloped in front of the now charging cavalymen there rose a shout of "The king! The king!"

With the force of an avalanche the Royal Horse rode through those two batteries of field artillery; and in the thick of the fight that followed rode the American, a smile upon his face, for in his ears rang the wild shouts of his troopers: "For the king! For the king!"

In the moment that the enemy made their first determined stand a bullet brought down the great bay upon which Barney rode. A dozen of Peter's men rushed forward to seize the man stumbling to his feet. As many more of the Royal Horse closed around him, and there, for five minutes, was waged as fierce a battle for possession of a king as was ever fought.

But already many of the artillerymen had deserted the guns that had not yet been attacked, for the magic name of king had turned their blood to water. Fifty or more raised a white flag and surrendered without striking a blow, and when, at last, Barney and his little bodyguard fought their way through those who surrounded them they found the balance of the field already won.

Upon the slope below the city the loyal troops were advancing upon the enemy. Old Prince Ludwig paced back and forth behind them, apparently oblivious to the rain of bullets about him. Every moment he turned his eyes toward the wooded ridge from which there now belched an almost continuous fusillade of shells upon the advancing royalists.

Quite suddenly the cannonading ceased and the old man halted in his tracks, his gaze riveted upon the wood. For several minutes he saw no sign of what was transpiring behind that screen of sere and yellow autumn leaves, and then a man came running out, and after him another and another.

The prince raised his field glasses to his eyes. He almost cried aloud in his relief--the uniforms of the fugitives were those of artillerymen, and only cavalry had accompanied the king. A moment later there appeared in the center of his lenses a tall figure with a full beard. He rode, swinging his saber above his head, and behind him at full gallop came a squadron of the Royal Horse.

Old von der Tann could restrain himself no longer.

"The king! The king!" he cried to those about him, pointing in the direction of the wood.

The officers gathered there and the soldiery before him heard and took up the cry, and then from the old man's lips came the command, "Charge!" and a thousand men tore down the slopes of Lustadt upon the forces of Peter of Blentz, while from the east the king charged their right flank at the head of the Royal Horse.

Peter of Blentz saw that the day was lost, for the troops upon the right were crumpling before the false king while he and his cavalymen were yet a half mile distant. Before the retreat could become a rout the prince regent ordered his forces to fall back slowly upon a suburb that lies in the valley below the city.

Once safely there he raised a white flag, asking a conference with Prince Ludwig.

"Your majesty," said the old man, "what answer shall we send the traitor who even now ignores the presence of his king?"

"Treat with him," replied the American. "He may be honest enough in his belief that I am an impostor."

Von der Tann shrugged his shoulders, but did as Barney bid, and for half an hour the young man waited with Butzow while Von der Tann and Peter met halfway between the forces for their conference.

A dozen members of the most powerful of the older nobility accompanied Ludwig. When they returned their faces were a picture of puzzled bewilderment. With them were several officers, soldiers and civilians from Peter's contingency.

"What said he?" asked Barney.

"He said, your majesty," replied Von der Tann, "that he is confident you are not the king, and that these men he has sent with me knew the king well at Blentz. As proof that you are not the king he has offered the evidence of your own denials--made not only to his officers and soldiers, but to the man who is now your loyal lieutenant, Butzow, and to the Princess Emma von der Tann, my daughter.

"He insists that he is fighting for the welfare of Lutha, while we are traitors, attempting to seat an impostor upon the throne of the dead Leopold. I will admit that we are at a loss, your majesty, to know where lies the truth and where the falsity in this matter.

"We seek only to serve our country and our king but there are those among us who, to be entirely frank, are not yet convinced that you are Leopold. The result of the conference may not, then, meet with the hearty approval of your majesty."

"What was the result?" asked Barney.

"It was decided that all hostilities cease, and that Prince Peter be given an opportunity to establish the validity of his claim that your majesty is an impostor. If he is able to do so to the entire satisfaction of a majority of the old nobility, we have agreed to support him in a return to his regency."

For a moment there was deep silence. Many of the nobles stood with averted faces and eyes upon the ground.

The American, a half-smile upon his face, turned toward the men of Peter who had come to denounce him. He knew what their verdict would be. He knew that if

he were to save the throne for Leopold he must hold it at any cost until Leopold should be found.

Troopers were scouring the country about Lustadt as far as Blentz in search of Maenck and Coblich. Could they locate these two and arrest them "with all found in their company," as his order read, he felt sure that he would be able to deliver the missing king to his subjects in time for the coronation at noon.

Barney looked straight into the eyes of old Von der Tann.

"You have given us the opinion of others, Prince Ludwig," he said. "Now you may tell us your own views of the matter."

"I shall have to abide by the decision of the majority," replied the old man. "But I have seen your majesty under fire, and if you are not the king, for Lutha's sake you ought to be."

"He is not Leopold," said one of the officers who had accompanied the prince from Peter's camp. "I was governor of Blentz for three years and as familiar with the king's face as with that of my own brother."

"No," cried several of the others, "this man is not the king."

Several of the nobles drew away from Barney. Others looked at him questioningly.

Butzow stepped close to his side, and it was noticeable that the troopers, and even the officers, of the Royal Horse which Barney had led in the charge upon the two batteries in the wood, pressed a little closer to the American. This fact did not escape Butzow's notice.

"If you are content to take the word of the servants of a traitor and a would-be regicide," he cried, "I am not. There has been no proof advanced that this man is not the king. In so far as I am concerned he is the king, nor ever do I expect to serve another more worthy of the title."

"If Peter of Blentz has real proof--not the testimony of his own faction--that Leopold of Lutha is dead, let him bring it forward before noon today, for at noon we shall crown a king in the cathedral at Lustadt, and I for one pray to God that it may be he who has led us in battle today."

A shout of applause rose from the Royal Horse, and from the foot-soldiers who had seen the king charge across the plain, scattering the enemy before him.

Barney, appreciating the advantage in the sudden turn affairs had taken following Butzow's words, swung to his saddle.

"Until Peter of Blentz brings to Lustadt one with a better claim to the throne," he said, "we shall continue to rule Lutha, nor shall other than Leopold be crowned her king. We approve of the amnesty you have granted, Prince Ludwig, and Peter of Blentz is free to enter Lustadt, as he will, so long as he does not plot against the true king.

"Major," he added, turning to the commander of the squadron at his back, "we are returning to the palace. Your squadron will escort us, remaining on guard there about the grounds. Prince Ludwig, you will see that machine guns are placed about the palace and commanding the approaches to the cathedral."

With a nod to the cavalry major he wheeled his horse and trotted up the slope toward Lustadt.

With a grim smile Prince Ludwig von der Tann mounted his horse and rode toward the fort. At his side were several of the nobles of Lutha. They looked at him in astonishment.

"You are doing his bidding, although you do not know that he is the true king?" asked one of them.

"Were he an impostor," replied the old man, "he would have insisted by word of mouth that he is king. But not once has he said that he is Leopold. Instead, he has proved his kingship by his acts."