

Chapter XI - A TIMELY INTERVENTION

Nine o'clock found Barney Custer pacing up and down his apartments in the palace. No clue as to the whereabouts of Coblich, Maenck or the king had been discovered. One by one his troopers had returned to Butzow empty-handed, and as much at a loss as to the hiding-place of their quarry as when they had set out upon their search.

Peter of Blentz and his retainers had entered the city and already had commenced to gather at the cathedral.

Peter, at the residence of Coblich, had succeeded in gathering about him many of the older nobility whom he pledged to support him in case he could prove to them that the man who occupied the royal palace was not Leopold of Lutha.

They agreed to support him in his regency if he produced proof that the true Leopold was dead, and Peter of Blentz waited with growing anxiety the coming of Coblich with word that he had the king in custody. Peter was staking all on a single daring move which he had decided to make in his game of intrigue.

As Barney paced within the palace, waiting for word that Leopold had been found, Peter of Blentz was filled with equal apprehension as he, too, waited for the same tidings. At last he heard the pound of hoofs upon the pavement without and a moment later Coblich, his clothing streaked with dirt, blood caked upon his face from a wound across the forehead, rushed in to the presence of the prince regent.

Peter drew him hurriedly into a small study on the first floor.

"Well?" he whispered, as the two faced each other.

"We have him," replied Coblich. But we had the devil's own time getting him. Stein was killed and Maenck and I both wounded, and all morning we have spent the time hiding from troopers who seemed to be searching for us. Only fifteen minutes since did we reach the hiding-place that you instructed us to use. But we have him, your highness, and he is in such a state of cowardly terror that he is ready to agree to anything, if you will but spare his life and set him free across the border."

"It is too late for that now, Coblich," replied Peter. "There is but one way that Leopold of Lutha can serve me now, and that is--dead. Were his corpse to be carried into the cathedral of Lustadt before noon today, and were those who fetched it to swear that the king was killed by the impostor after being dragged from the hospital at Tafelberg where you and Maenck had located him, and from

which you were attempting to rescue him, I believe that the people would tear our enemies to pieces. What say you, Coblich?"

The other stared at Peter of Blentz for several seconds while the atrocity of his chief's plan filtered through his brain.

"My God!" he exclaimed at last. "You mean that you wish me to murder Leopold with my own hands?"

"You put it too crudely, my dear Coblich," replied the other.

"I cannot do it," muttered Coblich. "I have never killed a man in my life. I am getting old. No, I could never do it. I should not sleep nights."

"If it is not done, Coblich, and Leopold comes into his own," said Peter slowly, "you will be caught and hanged higher than Haman. And if you do not do it, and the imposter is crowned today, then you will be either hanged officially or knifed unofficially, and without any choice in the matter whatsoever. Nothing, Coblich, but the dead body of the true Leopold can save your neck. You have your choice, therefore, of letting him live to prove your treason, or letting him die and becoming chancellor of Lutha."

Slowly Coblich turned toward the door. "You are right," he said, "but may God have mercy on my soul. I never thought that I should have to do it with my own hands."

So saying he left the room and a moment later Peter of Blentz smiled as he heard the pounding of a horse's hoofs upon the pavement without.

Then the Regent entered the room he had recently quitted and spoke to the nobles of Lutha who were gathered there.

"Coblich has found the body of the murdered king," he said. "I have directed him to bring it to the cathedral. He came upon the impostor and his confederate, Lieutenant Butzow, as they were bearing the corpse from the hospital at Tafelberg where the king has lain unknown since the rumor was spread by Von der Tann that he had been killed by bandits.

"He was not killed until last evening, my lords, and you shall see today the fresh wounds upon him. When the time comes that we can present this grisly evidence of the guilt of the impostor and those who uphold him, I shall expect you all to stand at my side, as you have promised."

With one accord the noblemen pledged anew their allegiance to Peter of Blentz if he could produce one-quarter of the evidence he claimed to possess.

"All that we wish to know positively is," said one, "that the man who bears the title of king today is really Leopold of Lutha, or that he is not. If not then he stands convicted of treason, and we shall know how to conduct ourselves."

Together the party rode to the cathedral, the majority of the older nobility now openly espousing the cause of the Regent.

At the palace Barney was about distracted. Butzow was urging him to take the crown whether he was Leopold or not, for the young lieutenant saw no hope for Lutha, if either the scoundrelly Regent or the cowardly man whom Barney had assured him was the true king should come into power.

It was eleven o'clock. In another hour Barney knew that he must have found some new solution of his dilemma, for there seemed little probability that the king would be located in the brief interval that remained before the coronation. He wondered what they did to people who stole thrones. For a time he figured his chances of reaching the border ahead of the enraged populace. All had depended upon the finding of the king, and he had been so sure that it could be accomplished in time, for Coblich and Maenck had had but a few hours in which to conceal the monarch before the search was well under way.

Armed with the king's warrants, his troopers had ridden through the country, searching houses, and questioning all whom they met. Patrols had guarded every road that the fugitives might take either to Lustadt, Blentz, or the border; but no king had been found and no trace of his abductors.

Prince von der Tann, Barney was convinced, was on the point of deserting him, and going over to the other side. It was true that the old man had carried out his instructions relative to the placing of the machine guns; but they might be used as well against him, where they stood, as for him.

From his window he could see the broad avenue which passes before the royal palace of Lutha. It was crowded with throngs moving toward the cathedral. Presently there came a knock upon the closed door of his chamber.

At his "Enter" a functionary announced: "His Royal Highness Ludwig, Prince von der Tann!"

The old man was much perturbed at the rumors he had heard relative to the assassination of the true Leopold. Soldier-like, he blurted out his suspicions and his ultimatum.

"None but the royal blood of Rubinroth may reign in Lutha while there be a Rubinroth left to reign and old Von der Tann lives," he cried in conclusion.

At the name "Rubinroth" Barney started. It was his mother's name. Suddenly the truth flashed upon him. He understood now the reticence of both his father and mother relative to her early life.

"Prince Ludwig," said the young man earnestly, "I have only the good of Lutha in my heart. For three weeks I have labored and risked death a hundred times to place the legitimate heir to the crown of Lutha upon his throne. I--"

He hesitated, not knowing just how to commence the confession he was determined to make, though he was positive that it would place Peter of Blentz upon the throne, since the old prince had promised to support the Regent could it be proved that Barney was an impostor.

"I," he started again, and then there came an interruption at the door.

"A messenger, your majesty," announced the doorman, "who says that he must have audience at once upon a matter of life and death to the king."

"We will see him in the ante-chamber," replied Barney, moving toward the door. "Await us here, Prince Ludwig."

A moment later he re-entered the apartment. There was an expression of renewed hope upon his face.

"As we were about to remark, my dear prince," he said, "I swear that the royal blood of the Rubinroths flows in my veins, and as God is my judge, none other than the true Leopold of Lutha shall be crowned today. And now we must prepare for the coronation. If there be trouble in the cathedral, Prince Ludwig, we look to your sword in protection of the king."

"When I am with you, sire," said Von der Tann, "I know that you are king. When I saw how you led the troops in battle, I prayed that there could be no mistake. God give that I am right. But God help you if you are playing with old Ludwig von der Tann."

When the old man had left the apartment Barney summoned an aide and sent for Butzow. Then he hurried to the bath that adjoined the apartment, and when the lieutenant of horse was announced Barney called through a soapy lather for his confederate to enter.

"What are you doing, sire?" cried Butzow in amazement.

"Cut out the 'sire,' old man," shouted Barney Custer of Beatrice. "this is the fifth of November and I am shaving off this alfalfa. The king is found!"

"What?" cried Butzow, and upon his face there was little to indicate the rejoicing that a loyal subject of Leopold of Lutha should have felt at that announcement.

"There is a man in the next room," went on Barney, "who can lead us to the spot where Coblich and Maenck guard the king. Get him in here."

Butzow hastened to comply with the American's instructions, and a moment later returned to the apartment with the old shopkeeper of Tafelberg.

As Barney shaved he issued directions to the two. Within the room to the east, he said, there were the king's coronation robes, and in a smaller dressingroom beyond they would find a long gray cloak.

They were to wrap all these in a bundle which the old shopkeeper was to carry.

"And, Butzow," added Barney, "look to my revolvers and your own, and lay my sword out as well. The chances are that we shall have to use them before we are ten minutes older."

In an incredibly short space of time the young man emerged from the bath, his luxuriant beard gone forever, he hoped. Butzow looked at him with a smile.

"I must say that the beard did not add greatly to your majesty's good looks," he said.

"Never mind the bouquets, old man," cried Barney, cramming his arms into the sleeves of his khaki jacket and buckling sword and revolver about him, as he hurried toward a small door that opened upon the opposite side of the apartment to that through which his visitors had been conducted.

Together the three hastened through a narrow, little-used corridor and down a flight of well-worn stone steps to a door that let upon the rear court of the palace.

There were grooms and servants there, and soldiers too, who saluted Butzow, according the old shopkeeper and the smooth-faced young stranger only cursory glances. It was evident that without his beard it was not likely that Barney would be again mistaken for the king.

At the stables Butzow requisitioned three horses, and soon the trio was galloping through a little-frequented street toward the northern, hilly environs of Lustadt. They rode in silence until they came to an old stone building, whose boarded windows and general appearance of dilapidation proclaimed its long tenantless condition. Rank weeds, now rustling dry and yellow in the November wind, choked what once might have been a luxuriant garden. A stone wall, which had at one time entirely surrounded the grounds, had been almost completely

removed from the front to serve as foundation stone for a smaller edifice farther down the mountainside.

The horsemen avoided this break in the wall, coming up instead upon the rear side where their approach was wholly screened from the building by the wall upon that exposure.

Close in they dismounted, and leaving the animals in charge of the shopkeeper of Tafelberg, Barney and Butzow hastened toward a small postern-gate which swung, groaning, upon a single rusted hinge. Each felt that there was no time for caution or stratagem. Instead all depended upon the very boldness and rashness of their attack, and so as they came through into the courtyard the two dashed headlong for the building.

Chance accomplished for them what no amount of careful execution might have done, and they came within the ruin unnoticed by the four who occupied the old, darkened library.

Possibly the fact that one of the men had himself just entered and was excitedly talking to the others may have drowned the noisy approach of the two. However that may be, it is a fact that Barney and the cavalry officer came to the very door of the library unheard.

There they halted, listening. Coblich was speaking.

"The Regent commands it, Maenck," he was saying. "It is the only thing that can save our necks. He said that you had better be the one to do it, since it was your carelessness that permitted the fellow to escape from Blentz."

Huddled in a far corner of the room was an abject figure trembling in terror. At the words of Coblich it staggered to its feet. It was the king.

"Have pity--have pity!" he cried. "Do not kill me, and I will go away where none will ever know that I live. You can tell Peter that I am dead. Tell him anything, only spare my life. Oh, why did I ever listen to the cursed fool who tempted me to think of regaining the crown that has brought me only misery and suffering--the crown that has now placed the sentence of death upon me."

"Why not let him go?" suggested the trooper, who up to this time had not spoken. "If we don't kill him, we can't be hanged for his murder."

"Don't be too sure of that," exclaimed Maenck. "If he goes away and never returns, what proof can we offer that we did not kill him, should we be charged with the crime? And if we let him go, and later he returns and gains his throne, he will see that we are hanged anyway for treason."

"The safest thing to do is to put him where he at least cannot come back to threaten us, and having done so upon the orders of Peter, let the king's blood be upon Peter's head. I, at least, shall obey my master, and let you two bear witness that I did the thing with my own hand." So saying he drew his sword and crossed toward the king.

But Captain Ernst Maenck never reached his sovereign.

As the terrified shriek of the sorry monarch rang through the interior of the desolate ruin another sound mingled with it, half-drowning the piercing wail of terror.

It was the sharp crack of a revolver, and even as it spoke Maenck lunged awkwardly forward, stumbled, and collapsed at Leopold's feet. With a moan the king shrank back from the grisly thing that touched his boot, and then two men were in the center of the room, and things were happening with a rapidity that was bewildering.

About all that he could afterward recall with any distinctness was the terrified face of Coblich, as he rushed past him toward a door in the opposite side of the room, and the horrid leer upon the face of the dead trooper, who foolishly, had made a move to draw his revolver.

Within the cathedral at Lustadt excitement was at fever heat. It lacked but two minutes of noon, and as yet no king had come to claim the crown. Rumors were running riot through the close-packed audience.

One man had heard the king's chamberlain report to Prince von der Tann that the master of ceremonies had found the king's apartments vacant when he had gone to urge the monarch to hasten his preparations for the coronation.

Another had seen Butzow and two strangers galloping north through the city. A third told of a little old man who had come to the king with an urgent message.

Peter of Blentz and Prince Ludwig were talking in whispers at the foot of the chancel steps. Peter ascended the steps and facing the assemblage raised a silencing hand.

"He who claimed to be Leopold of Lutha," he said, "was but a mad adventurer. He would have seized the throne of the Rubinroths had his nerve not failed him at the last moment. He has fled. The true king is dead. Now I, Prince Regent of Lutha, declare the throne vacant, and announce myself king!"

There were a few scattered cheers and some hissing. A score of the nobles rose as though to protest, but before any could take a step the attention of all was

directed toward the sorry figure of a white-faced man who scurried up the broad center aisle.

It was Coblich.

He ran to Peter's side, and though he attempted to speak in a whisper, so out of breath, and so filled with hysterical terror was he that his words came out in gasps that were audible to many of those who stood near by.

"Maenck is dead," he cried. "The impostor has stolen the king."

Peter of Blentz went white as his lieutenant. Von der Tann heard and demanded an explanation.

"You said that Leopold was dead," he said accusingly.

Peter regained his self-control quickly.

"Coblich is excited," he explained. "He means that the impostor has stolen the body of the king that Coblich and Maenck had discovered and were bring to Lustadt."

Von der Tann looked troubled.

He knew not what to make of the series of wild tales that had come to his ears within the past hour. He had hoped that the young man whom he had last seen in the king's apartments was the true Leopold. He would have been glad to have served such a one, but there had been many inexplicable occurrences which tended to cast a doubt upon the man's claims--and yet, had he ever claimed to be the king? It suddenly occurred to the old prince that he had not. On the contrary he had repeatedly stated to Prince Ludwig's daughter and to Lieutenant Butzow that he was not Leopold.

It seemed that they had all been so anxious to believe him king that they had forced the false position upon him, and now if he had indeed committed the atrocity that Coblich charged against him, who could wonder? With less provocation men had before attempted to seize thrones by more dastardly means.

Peter of Blentz was speaking.

"Let the coronation proceed," he cried, "that Lutha may have a true king to frustrate the plans of the impostor and the traitors who had supported him."

He cast a meaning glance at Prince von der Tann.

There were many cries for Peter of Blentz. "Let's have done with treason, and place upon the throne of Lutha one whom we know to be both a Luthanian and sane. Down with the mad king! Down with the impostor!"

Peter turned to ascend the chancel steps.

Von der Tann still hesitated. Below him upon one side of the aisle were massed his own retainers. Opposite them were the men of the Regent, and dividing the two the parallel ranks of Horse Guards stretched from the chancel down the broad aisle to the great doors. These were strongly for the impostor, if impostor he was, who had led them to victory over the men of the Blentz faction.

Von der Tann knew that they would fight to the last ditch for their hero should he come to claim the crown. Yet how would they fight--to which side would they cleave, were he to attempt to frustrate the design of the Regent to seize the throne of Lutha?

Already Peter of Blentz had approached the bishop, who, eager to propitiate whoever seemed most likely to become king, gave the signal for the procession that was to mark the solemn bearing of the crown of Lutha up the aisle to the chancel.

Outside the cathedral there was the sudden blare of trumpets. The great doors swung violently open, and the entire throng were upon their feet in an instant as a trooper of the Royal Horse shouted: "The king! The king! Make way for Leopold of Lutha!"