

## **Chapter XII - THE GRATITUDE OF A KING**

At the cry silence fell upon the throng. Every head was turned toward the great doors through which the head of a procession was just visible. It was a grim looking procession--the head of it, at least.

There were four khaki-clad trumpeters from the Royal Horse Guards, the gay and resplendent uniforms which they should have donned today conspicuous for their absence. From their brazen bugles sounded another loud fanfare, and then they separated, two upon each side of the aisle, and between them marched three men.

One was tall, with gray eyes and had a reddish-brown beard. He was fully clothed in the coronation robes of Leopold. Upon his either hand walked the others--Lieutenant Butzow and a gray-eyed, smooth-faced, square-jawed stranger.

Behind them marched the balance of the Royal Horse Guards that were not already on duty within the cathedral. As the eyes of the multitude fell upon the man in the coronation robes there were cries of: "The king! Impostor!" and "Von der Tann's puppet!"

"Denounce him!" whispered one of Peter's henchmen in his master's ear.

The Regent moved closer to the aisle, that he might meet the impostor at the foot of the chancel steps. The procession was moving steadily up the aisle.

Among the clan of Von der Tann a young girl with wide eyes was bending forward that she might have a better look at the face of the king. As he came opposite her her eyes filled with horror, and then she saw the eyes of the smooth-faced stranger at the king's side. They were brave, laughing eyes, and as they looked straight into her own the truth flashed upon her, and the girl gave a gasp of dismay as she realized that the king of Lutha and the king of her heart were not one and the same.

At last the head of the procession was almost at the foot of the chancel steps. There were murmurs of: "It is not the king," and "Who is this new impostor?"

Leopold's eyes were searching the faces of the close-packed nobility about the chancel. At last they fell upon the face of Peter. The young man halted not two paces from the Regent. The man went white as the king's eyes bored straight into his miserable soul.

"Peter of Blentz," cried the young man, "as God is your judge, tell the truth today. Who am I?"

The legs of the Prince Regent trembled. He sank upon his knees, raising his hands in supplication toward the other. "Have pity on me, your majesty, have pity!" he cried.

"Who am I, man?" insisted the king.

"You are Leopold Rubinroth, sire, by the grace of God, king of Lutha," cried the frightened man. "Have mercy on an old man, your majesty."

"Wait! Am I mad? Was I ever mad?"

"As God is my judge, sire, no!" replied Peter of Blentz.

Leopold turned to Butzow.

"Remove the traitor from our presence," he commanded, and at a word from the lieutenant a dozen guardsmen seized the trembling man and hustled him from the cathedral amid hisses and execrations.

Following the coronation the king was closeted in his private audience chamber in the palace with Prince Ludwig.

"I cannot understand what has happened, even now, your majesty," the old man was saying. "That you are the true Leopold is all that I am positive of, for the discomfiture of Prince Peter evidenced that fact all too plainly. But who the impostor was who ruled Lutha in your name for two days, disappearing as miraculously as he came, I cannot guess.

"But for another miracle which preserved you for us in the nick of time he might now be wearing the crown of Lutha in your stead. Having Peter of Blentz safely in custody our next immediate task should be to hunt down the impostor and bring him to justice also; though"--and the old prince sighed--"he was indeed a brave man, and a noble figure of a king as he led your troops to battle."

The king had been smiling as Von der Tann first spoke of the "impostor," but at the old man's praise of the other's bravery a slight flush tinged his cheek, and the shadow of a scowl crossed his brow.

"Wait," he said, "we shall not have to look far for your 'impostor,'" and summoning an aide he dispatched him for "Lieutenant Butzow and Mr. Custer."

A moment later the two entered the audience chamber. Barney found that Leopold the king, surrounded by comforts and safety, was a very different person

from Leopold the fugitive. The weak face now wore an expression of arrogance, though the king spoke most graciously to the American.

"Here, Von der Tann," said Leopold, "is your 'impostor.' But for him I should doubtless be dead by now, or once again a prisoner at Blentz."

Barney and Butzow found it necessary to repeat their stories several times before the old man could fully grasp all that had transpired beneath his very nose without his being aware of scarce a single detail of it.

When he was finally convinced that they were telling the truth, he extended his hand to the American.

"I knelt to you once, young man," he said, "and kissed your hand. I should be filled with bitterness and rage toward you. On the contrary, I find that I am proud to have served in the retinue of such an impostor as you, for you upheld the prestige of the house of Rubinroth upon the battlefield, and though you might have had a crown, you refused it and brought the true king into his own."

Leopold sat tapping his foot upon the carpet. It was all very well if he, the king, chose to praise the American, but there was no need for old von der Tann to slop over so. The king did not like it. As a matter of fact, he found himself becoming very jealous of the man who had placed him upon his throne.

"There is only one thing that I can harbor against you," continued Prince Ludwig, "and that is that in a single instance you deceived me, for an hour before the coronation you told me that you were a Rubinroth."

"I told you, prince," corrected Barney, "that the royal blood of Rubinroth flowed in my veins, and so it does. I am the son of the runaway Princess Victoria of Lutha."

Both Leopold and Ludwig looked their surprise, and to the king's eyes came a sudden look of fear. With the royal blood in his veins, what was there to prevent this popular hero from some day striving for the throne he had once refused? Leopold knew that the minds of men were wont to change most unaccountably.

"Butzow," he said suddenly to the lieutenant of horse, "how many do you imagine know positively that he who has ruled Lutha for the past two days and he who was crowned in the cathedral this noon are not one and the same?"

"Only a few besides those who are in this room, your majesty," replied Butzow. "Peter and Coblich have known it from the first, and then there is Kramer, the loyal old shopkeeper of Tafelberg, who followed Coblich and Maenck all night and half a day as they dragged the king to the hiding-place where we found him.

Other than these there may be those who guess the truth, but there are none who know."

For a moment the king sat in thought. Then he rose and commenced packing back and forth the length of the apartment.

"Why should they ever know?" he said at last, halting before the three men who had been standing watching him. "For the sake of Lutha they should never know that another than the true king sat upon the throne even for an hour."

He was thinking of the comparison that might be drawn between the heroic figure of the American and his own colorless part in the events which had led up to his coronation. In his heart of hearts he felt that old Von der Tann rather regretted that the American had not been the king, and he hated the old man accordingly, and was commencing to hate the American as well.

Prince Ludwig stood looking at the carpet after the king had spoken. His judgment told him that the king's suggestion was a wise one; but he was sorry and ashamed that it had come from Leopold. Butzow's lips almost showed the contempt that he felt for the ingratitude of his king.

Barney Custer was the first to speak.

"I think his majesty is quite right," he said, "and tonight I can leave the palace after dark and cross the border some time tomorrow evening. The people need never know the truth."

Leopold looked relieved.

"We must reward you, Mr. Custer," he said. "Name that which it lies within our power to grant you and it shall be yours."

Barney thought of the girl he loved; but he did not mention her name, for he knew that she was not for him now.

"There is nothing, your majesty," he said.

"A money reward," Leopold started to suggest, and then Barney Custer lost his temper.

A flush mounted to his face, his chin went up, and there came to his lips bitter words of sarcasm. With an effort, however, he held his tongue, and, turning his back upon the king, his broad shoulders proclaiming the contempt he felt, he walked slowly out of the room.

Von der Tann and Butzow and Leopold of Lutha stood in silence as the American passed out of sight beyond the portal.

The manner of his going had been an affront to the king, and the young ruler had gone red with anger.

"Butzow," he cried, "bring the fellow back; he shall be taught a lesson in the deference that is due kings."

Butzow hesitated. "He has risked his life a dozen times for your majesty," said the lieutenant.

Leopold flushed.

"Do not humiliate him, sire," advised Von der Tann. "He has earned a greater reward at your hands than that."

The king resumed his pacing for a moment, coming to a halt once more before the two.

"We shall take no notice of his insolence," he said, "and that shall be our royal reward for his services. More than he deserves, we dare say, at that."

As Barney hastened through the palace on his way to his new quarters to obtain his arms and order his horse saddled, he came suddenly upon a girlish figure gazing sadly from a window upon the drear November world--her heart as sad as the day.

At the sound of his footstep she turned, and as her eyes met the gray ones of the man she stood poised as though of half a mind to fly. For a moment neither spoke.

"Can your highness forgive?" he asked.

For answer the girl buried her face in her hands and dropped upon the cushioned window seat before her. The American came close and knelt at her side.

"Don't," he begged as he saw her shoulders rise to the sudden sobbing that racked her slender frame. "Don't!"

He thought that she wept from mortification that she had given her kisses to another than the king.

"None knows," he continued, "what has passed between us. None but you and I need ever know. I tried to make you understand that I was not Leopold; but you would not believe. It is not my fault that I loved you. It is not my fault that I shall

always love you. Tell me that you forgive me my part in the chain of strange circumstances that deceived you into an acknowledgment of a love that you intended for another. Forgive me, Emma!"

Down the corridor behind them a tall figure approached on silent, noiseless feet. At sight of the two at the window seat it halted. It was the king.

The girl looked up suddenly into the eyes of the American bending so close above her.

"I can never forgive you," she cried, "for not being the king, for I am betrothed to him--and I love you!"

Before she could prevent him, Barney Custer had taken her in his arms, and though at first she made a pretense of attempting to escape, at last she lay quite still. Her arms found their way about the man's neck, and her lips returned the kisses that his were showering upon her upturned mouth.

Presently her glance wandered above the shoulder of the American, and of a sudden her eyes filled with terror, and, with a little gasp of consternation, she struggled to free herself.

"Let me go!" she whispered. "Let me go--the king!"

Barney sprang to his feet and, turning, faced Leopold. The king had gone quite white.

"Failing to rob me of my crown," he cried in a trembling voice, "you now seek to rob me of my betrothed! Go to your father at once, and as for you--you shall learn what it means for you thus to meddle in the affairs of kings."

Barney saw the terrible position in which his love had placed the Princess Emma. His only thought now was for her. Bowing low before her he spoke so that the king might hear, yet as though his words were for her ears alone.

"Your highness knows the truth, now," he said, "and that after all I am not the king. I can only ask that you will forgive me the deception. Now go to your father as the king commands."

Slowly the girl turned away. Her heart was torn between love for this man, and her duty toward the other to whom she had been betrothed in childhood. The hereditary instinct of obedience to her sovereign was strong within her, and the bonds of custom and society held her in their relentless shackles. With a sob she passed up the corridor, curtsying to the king as she passed him.

When she had gone Leopold turned to the American. There was an evil look in the little gray eyes of the monarch.

"You may go your way," he said coldly. "We shall give you forty-eight hours to leave Lutha. Should you ever return your life shall be the forfeit."

The American kept back the hot words that were ready upon the end of his tongue. For her sake he must bow to fate. With a slight inclination of his head toward Leopold he wheeled and resumed his way toward his quarters.

Half an hour later as he was about to descend to the courtyard where a trooper of the Royal Horse held his waiting mount, Butzow burst suddenly into his room.

"For God's sake," cried the lieutenant, "get out of this. The king has changed his mind, and there is an officer of the guard on his way here now with a file of soldiers to place you under arrest. Leopold swears that he will hang you for treason. Princess Emma has spurned him, and he is wild with rage."

The dismal November twilight had given place to bleak night as two men cantered from the palace courtyard and turned their horses' heads northward toward Lutha's nearest boundary. All night they rode, stopping at daylight before a distant farm to feed and water their mounts and snatch a mouthful for themselves. Then onward once again they pressed in their mad flight.

Now that day had come they caught occasional glimpses of a body of horsemen far behind them, but the border was near, and their start such that there was no danger of their being overtaken.

"For the thousandth time, Butzow," said one of the men, "will you turn back before it is too late?"

But the other only shook his head obstinately, and so they came to the great granite monument which marks the boundary between Lutha and her powerful neighbor upon the north.

Barney held out his hand. "Good-bye, old man," he said. "If I've learned the ingratitude of kings here in Lutha, I have found something that more than compensates me--the friendship of a brave man. Now hurry back and tell them that I escaped across the border just as I was about to fall into your hands and they will think that you have been pursuing me instead of aiding in my escape across the border."

But again Butzow shook his head.

"I have fought shoulder to shoulder with you, my friend," he said. "I have called you king, and after that I could never serve the coward who sits now upon the throne of Lutha. I have made up my mind during this long ride from Lustadt, and I have come to the decision that I should prefer to raise corn in Nebraska with you rather than serve in the court of an ingrate."

"Well, you are an obstinate Dutchman, after all," replied the American with a smile, placing his hand affectionately upon the shoulder of his comrade.

There was a clatter of horses' hoofs upon the gravel of the road behind them.

The two men put spurs to their mounts, and Barney Custer galloped across the northern boundary of Lutha just ahead of a troop of Luthanian cavalry, as had his father thirty years before; but a royal princess had accompanied the father--only a soldier accompanied the son.