

PART II

Chapter I - BARNEY RETURNS TO LUTHA

"What's the matter, Vic?" asked Barney Custer of his sister. "You look peeved."

"I am peeved," replied the girl, smiling. "I am terribly peeved. I don't want to play bridge this afternoon. I want to go motoring with Lieutenant Butzow. This is his last day with us."

"Yes. I know it is, and I hate to think of it," replied Barney; "but why in the world do you have to play bridge if you don't want to?"

"I promised Margaret that I'd go. They're short one, and she's coming after me in her car."

"Where are you going to play--at the champion lady bridge player's on Fourth Street?" asked Barney, grinning.

His sister answered with a nod and a smile. "Where you brought down the wrath of the lady champion upon your head the other night when you were letting your mind wander across to Lutha and the Old Forest, instead of paying attention to the game," she added.

"Well, cheer up, Vic," cried her brother. "Bert'll probably set fire to the car, the way he did to their first one, and then you won't have to go."

"Oh, yes, I would; Margaret would send him after me in that awful-looking, unwashed Ford runabout of his," answered the girl.

"And then you WOULD go," said Barney.

"You bet I would," laughed Victoria. "I'd go in a wheelbarrow with Bert."

But she didn't have to; and after she had driven off with her chum, Barney and Butzow strolled down through the little city of Beatrice to the corn mill in which the former was interested.

"I'm mighty sorry that you have to leave us, Butzow," said Barney's partner. "It's bad enough to lose you, but I'm afraid it will mean the loss of Barney, too. He's been hunting for some excuse to get back to Lutha, and with you there and a war in sight I'm afraid nothing can hold him."

"I don't know but that it may be just as well for my friends here that I leave," said Butzow seriously. "I did not tell you, Barney, all there is in this letter"--he tapped his breastpocket, where the foreign-looking envelope reposed with its contents.

Custer looked at him inquiringly.

"Besides saying that war between Austria and Serbia seems unavoidable and that Lutha doubtless will be drawn into it, my informant warns me that Leopold had sent emissaries to America to search for you, Barney, and myself. What his purpose may be my friend does not know, but he warns us to be upon our guard. Von der Tann wants me to return to Lutha. He has promised to protect me, and with the country in danger there is nothing else for me to do. I must go."

"I wish I could go with you," said Barney. "If it wasn't for this dinged old mill I would; but Bert wants to go away this summer, and as I have been away most of the time for the past two years, it's up to me to stay."

As the three men talked the afternoon wore on. Heavy clouds gathered in the sky; a storm was brewing. Outside, a man, skulking behind a box car on the siding, watched the entrance through which the three had gone. He watched the workmen, and as quitting time came and he saw them leaving for their homes he moved more restlessly, transferring the package which he held from one hand to another many times, yet always gingerly.

At last all had left. The man started from behind the box car, only to jump back as the watchman appeared around the end of one of the buildings. He watched the guardian of the property make his rounds; he saw him enter his office, and then he crept forward toward the building, holding his queer package in his right hand.

In the office the watchman came upon the three friends. At sight of him they looked at one another in surprise.

"Why, what time is it?" exclaimed Custer, and as he looked at his watch he rose with a laugh. "Late to dinner again," he cried. "Come on, we'll go out this other way." And with a cheery good night to the watchman Barney and his friends hastened from the building.

Upon the opposite side the stranger approached the doorway to the mill. The rain was falling in blinding sheets. Ominously the thunder roared. Vivid flashes of lightning shot the heavens. The watchman, coming suddenly from the doorway, his hat brim pulled low over his eyes, passed within a couple of paces of the stranger without seeing him.

Five minutes later there was a blinding glare accompanied by a deafening roar. It was as though nature had marshaled all her forces in one mighty, devastating effort. At the same instant the walls of the great mill burst asunder, a nebulous mass of burning gas shot heavenward, and then the flames settled down to complete the destruction of the ruin.

It was the following morning that Victoria and Barney Custer, with Lieutenant Butzow and Custer's partner, stood contemplating the smoldering wreckage.

"And to think," said Barney, "that yesterday this muss was the largest corn mill west of anywhere. I guess we can both take vacations now, Bert."

"Who would have thought that a single bolt of lightning could have resulted in such havoc?" mused Victoria.

"Who would?" agreed Lieutenant Butzow, and then, with a sudden narrowing of his eyes and a quick glance at Barney, "if it WAS lightning."

The American looked at the Luthanian. "You think--" he started.

"I don't dare think," replied Butzow, "because of the fear of what this may mean to you and Miss Victoria if it was not lightning that destroyed the mill. I shouldn't have spoken of it but that it may urge you to greater caution, which I cannot but think is most necessary since the warning I received from Lutha."

"Why should Leopold seek to harm me now?" asked Barney. "It has been almost two years since you and I placed him upon his throne, only to be rewarded with threats and hatred. In that time neither of us has returned to Lutha nor in any way conspired against the king. I cannot fathom his motives."

"There is the Princess Emma von der Tann," Butzow reminded him. "She still repulses him. He may think that, with you removed definitely and permanently, all will then be plain sailing for him in that direction. Evidently he does not know the princess."

An hour later they were all bidding Butzow good-bye at the station. Victoria Custer was genuinely grieved to see him go, for she liked this soldierly young officer of the Royal Horse Guards immensely.

"You must come back to America soon," she urged.

He looked down at her from the steps of the moving train. There was something in his expression that she had never seen there before.

"I want to come back soon," he answered, "to--to Beatrice," and he flushed and smiled at his own stumbling tongue.

For about a week Barney Custer moped disconsolately, principally about the ruins of the corn mill. He was in everyone's way and accomplished nothing.

"I was never intended for a captain of industry," he confided to his partner for the hundredth time. "I wish some excuse would pop up to which I might hang a reason for beating it to Europe. There's something doing there. Nearly everybody has declared war upon everybody else, and here I am stagnating in peace. I'd even welcome a tornado."

His excuse was to come sooner than he imagined. That night, after the other members of his family had retired, Barney sat smoking within a screened porch off the living-room. His thoughts were upon a trim little figure in riding togs, as he had first seen it nearly two years before, clinging desperately to a runaway horse upon the narrow mountain road above Tafelberg.

He lived that thrilling experience through again as he had many times before. He even smiled as he recalled the series of events that had resulted from his resemblance to the mad king of Lutha.

They had come to a culmination at the time when the king, whom Barney had placed upon a throne at the risk of his own life, discovered that his savior loved the girl to whom the king had been betrothed since childhood and that the girl returned the American's love even after she knew that he had but played the part of a king.

Barney's cigar, forgotten, had long since died out. Not even its former fitful glow proclaimed his presence upon the porch, whose black shadows completely enveloped him. Before him stretched a wide acreage of lawn, tree dotted at the side of the house. Bushes hid the stone wall that marked the boundary of the Custer grounds and extended here and there out upon the sward among the trees. The night was moonless but clear. A faint light pervaded the scene.

Barney sat staring straight ahead, but his gaze did not stop upon the familiar objects of the foreground. Instead it spanned two continents and an ocean to rest upon the little spot of woodland and rugged mountain and lowland that is Lutha. It was with an effort that the man suddenly focused his attention upon that which lay directly before him. A shadow among the trees had moved!

Barney Custer sat perfectly still, but now he was suddenly alert and watchful. Again the shadow moved where no shadow should be moving. It crossed from the shade of one tree to another. Barney came cautiously to his feet. Silently he entered the house, running quickly to a side door that opened upon the grounds. As he drew it back its hinges gave forth no sound. Barney looked toward the spot

where he had seen the shadow. Again he saw it scuttle hurriedly beneath another tree nearer the house. This time there was no doubt. It was a man!

Directly before the door where Barney stood was a pergola, ivy-covered. Behind this he slid, and, running its length, came out among the trees behind the night prowler. Now he saw him distinctly. The fellow was bearded, and in his right hand he carried a package. Instantly Barney recalled Butzow's comment upon the destruction of the mill--"if it WAS lightning!"

Cold sweat broke from every pore of his body. His mother and father were there in the house, and Vic--all sleeping peacefully. He ran quickly toward the menacing figure, and as he did so he saw the other halt behind a great tree and strike a match. In the glow of the flame he saw it touch close to the package that the fellow held, and then he was upon him.

There was a brief and terrific struggle. The stranger hurled the package toward the house. Barney caught him by the throat, beating him heavily in the face; and then, realizing what the package was, he hurled the fellow from him, and sprang toward the hissing and sputtering missile where it lay close to the foundation wall of the house, though in the instant of his close contact with the man he had recognized through the disguising beard the features of Captain Ernst Maenck, the principal tool of Peter of Blentz.

Quick though Barney was to reach the bomb and extinguish the fuse, Maenck had disappeared before he returned to search for him; and, though he roused the gardener and chauffeur and took turns with them in standing guard the balance of the night, the would-be assassin did not return.

There was no question in Barney Custer's mind as to whom the bomb was intended for. That Maenck had hurled it toward the house after Barney had seized him was merely the result of accident and the man's desire to get the death-dealing missile as far from himself as possible before it exploded. That it would have wrecked the house in the hope of reaching him, had he not fortunately interfered, was too evident to the American to be questioned.

And so he decided before the night was spent to put himself as far from his family as possible, lest some future attempt upon his life might endanger theirs. Then, too, righteous anger and a desire for revenge prompted his decision. He would run Maenck to earth and have an accounting with him. It was evident that his life would not be worth a farthing so long as the fellow was at liberty.

Before dawn he swore the gardener and chauffeur to silence, and at breakfast announced his intention of leaving that day for New York to seek a commission as correspondent with an old classmate, who owned the New York Evening National.

At the hotel Barney inquired of the proprietor relative to a bearded stranger, but the man had had no one of that description registered. Chance, however, gave him a clue. His roadster was in a repair shop, and as he stopped in to get it he overheard a conversation that told him all he wanted to know. As he stood talking with the foreman a dust-covered automobile pulled into the garage.

"Hello, Bill," called the foreman to the driver. "Where you been so early?"

"Took a guy to Lincoln," replied the other. "He was in an awful hurry. I bet we broke all the records for that stretch of road this morning--I never knew the old boat had it in her."

"Who was it?" asked Barney.

"I dunno," replied the driver. "Talked like a furriner, and looked the part. Bushy black beard. Said he was a German army officer, an' had to beat it back on account of the war. Seemed to me like he was mighty anxious to get back there an' be killed."

Barney waited to hear no more. He did not even go home to say good-bye to his family. Instead he leaped into his gray roadster--a later model of the one he had lost in Lutha--and the last that Beatrice, Nebraska, saw of him was a whirling cloud of dust as he raced north out of town toward Lincoln.

He was five minutes too late into the capital city to catch the eastbound limited that Maenck must have taken; but he caught the next through train for Chicago, and the second day thereafter found him in New York. There he had little difficulty in obtaining the desired credentials from his newspaper friend, especially since Barney offered to pay all his own expenses and donate to the paper anything he found time to write.

Passenger steamers were still sailing, though irregularly, and after scanning the passenger-lists of three he found the name he sought. "Captain Ernst Maenck, Lutha." So he had not been mistaken, after all. It was Maenck he had apprehended on his father's grounds. Evidently the man had little fear of being followed, for he had made no effort to hide his identity in booking passage for Europe.

The steamer he had caught had sailed that very morning. Barney was not so sorry, after all, for he had had time during his trip from Beatrice to do considerable thinking, and had found it rather difficult to determine just what to do should he have overtaken Maenck in the United States. He couldn't kill the man in cold blood, justly as he may have deserved the fate, and the thought of

causing his arrest and dragging his own name into the publicity of court proceedings was little less distasteful to him.

Furthermore, the pursuit of Maenck now gave Barney a legitimate excuse for returning to Lutha, or at least to the close neighborhood of the little kingdom, where he might await the outcome of events and be ready to give his services in the cause of the house of Von der Tann should they be required.

By going directly to Italy and entering Austria from that country Barney managed to arrive within the boundaries of the dual monarchy with comparatively few delays. Nor did he encounter any considerable bodies of troops until he reached the little town of Burgova, which lies not far from the Serbian frontier. Beyond this point his credentials would not carry him. The emperor's officers were polite, but firm. No newspaper correspondents could be permitted nearer the front than Burgova.

There was nothing to be done, therefore, but wait until some propitious event gave him the opportunity to approach more closely the Serbian boundary and Lutha. In the meantime he would communicate with Butzow, who might be able to obtain passes for him to some village nearer the Luthanian frontier, when it should be an easy matter to cross through to Serbia. He was sure the Serbian authorities would object less strenuously to his presence.

The inn at which he applied for accommodations was already overrun by officers, but the proprietor, with scant apologies for a civilian, offered him a little box of a room in the attic. The place was scarce more than a closet, and for that Barney was in a way thankful since the limited space could accommodate but a single cot, thus insuring him the privacy that a larger chamber would have precluded.

He was very tired after his long and comfortless land journey, so after an early dinner he went immediately to his room and to bed. How long he slept he did not know, but some time during the night he was awakened by the sound of voices apparently close to his ear.

For a moment he thought the speakers must be in his own room, so distinctly did he overhear each word of their conversation; but presently he discovered that they were upon the opposite side of a thin partition in an adjoining room. But half awake, and with the sole idea of getting back to sleep again as quickly as possible, Barney paid only the slightest attention to the meaning of the words that fell upon his ears, until, like a bomb, a sentence broke through his sleepy faculties, banishing Morpheus upon the instant.

"It will take but little now to turn Leopold against Von der Tann." The speaker evidently was an Austrian. "Already I have half convinced him that the old man

aspires to the throne. Leopold fears the loyalty of his army, which is for Von der Tann body and soul. He knows that Von der Tann is strongly anti-Austrian, and I have made it plain to him that if he allows his kingdom to take sides with Serbia he will have no kingdom when the war is over--it will be a part of Austria.

"It was with greater difficulty, however, my dear Peter, that I convinced him that you, Von Coblich, and Captain Maenck were his most loyal friends. He fears you yet, but, nevertheless, he has pardoned you all. Do not forget when you return to your dear Lutha that you owe your repatriation to Count Zellerndorf of Austria."

"You may be assured that we shall never forget," replied another voice that Barney recognized at once as belonging to Prince Peter of Blentz, the one time regent of Lutha.

"It is not for myself," continued Count Zellerndorf, "that I crave your gratitude, but for my emperor. You may do much to win his undying gratitude, while for yourselves you may win to almost any height with the friendship of Austria behind you. I am sure that should any accident, which God forbend, deprive Lutha of her king, none would make a more welcome successor in the eyes of Austria than our good friend Peter."

Barney could almost see the smile of satisfaction upon the thin lips of Peter of Blentz as this broad hint fell from the lips of the Austrian diplomat--a hint that seemed to the American little short of the death sentence of Leopold, King of Lutha.

"We owed you much before, count," said Peter. "But for you we should have been hanged a year ago--without your aid we should never have been able to escape from the fortress of Lustadt or cross the border into Austria-Hungary. I am sorry that Maenck failed in his mission, for had he not we would have had concrete evidence to present to the king that we are indeed his loyal supporters. It would have dispelled at once such fears and doubts as he may still entertain of our fealty."

"Yes, I, too, am sorry," agreed Zellerndorf. "I can assure you that the news we hoped Captain Maenck would bring from America would have gone a long way toward restoring you to the confidence and good graces of the king."

"I did my best," came another voice that caused Barney's eyes to go wide in astonishment, for it was none other than the voice of Maenck himself. "Twice I risked hanging to get him and only came away after I had been recognized."

"It is too bad," sighed Zellerndorf; "though it may not be without its advantages after all, for now we still have this second bugbear to frighten Leopold with. So

long, of course, as the American lives there is always the chance that he may return and seek to gain the throne. The fact that his mother was a Rubinroth princess might make it easy for Von der Tann to place him upon the throne without much opposition, and if he married the old man's daughter it is easy to conceive that the prince might favor such a move. At any rate, it should not be difficult to persuade Leopold of the possibility of such a thing.

"Under the circumstances Leopold is almost convinced that his only hope of salvation lies in cementing friendly relations with the most powerful of Von der Tann's enemies, of which you three gentlemen stand preeminently in the foreground, and of assuring to himself the support of Austria. And now, gentlemen," he went on after a pause, "good night. I have handed Prince Peter the necessary military passes to carry you safely through our lines, and tomorrow you may be in Blentz if you wish."