

Chapter II - CONDEMNED TO DEATH

For some time Barney Custer lay there in the dark revolving in his mind all that he had overheard through the partition--the thin partition which alone lay between himself and three men who would be only too glad to embrace the first opportunity to destroy him. But his fears were not for himself so much as for the daughter of old Von der Tann, and for all that might befall that princely house were these three unhung rascals to gain Lutha and have their way with the weak and cowardly king who reigned there.

If he could but reach Von der Tann's ear and through him the king before the conspirators came to Lutha! But how might he accomplish it? Count Zellerndorf's parting words to the three had shown that military passes were necessary to enable one to reach Lutha.

His papers were practically worthless even inside the lines. That they would carry him through the lines he had not the slightest hope. There were two things to be accomplished if possible. One was to cross the frontier into Lutha; and the other, which of course was quite out of the question, was to prevent Peter of Blentz, Von Coblich, and Maenck from doing so. But was that altogether impossible?

The idea that followed that question came so suddenly that it brought Barney Custer out onto the floor in a bound, to don his clothes and sneak into the hall outside his room with the stealth of a professional second-story man.

To the right of his own door was the door to the apartment in which the three conspirators slept. At least, Barney hoped they slept. He bent close to the keyhole and listened. From within came no sound other than the regular breathing of the inmates. It had been at least half an hour since the American had heard the conversation cease. A glance through the keyhole showed no light within the room. Stealthily Barney turned the knob. Had they bolted the door? He felt the tumbler move to the pressure--soundlessly. Then he pushed gently inward. The door swung.

A moment later he stood in the room. Dimly he could see two beds--a large one and a smaller. Peter of Blentz would be alone upon the smaller bed, his henchmen sleeping together in the larger. Barney crept toward the lone sleeper. At the bedside he fumbled in the dark groping for the man's clothing--for the coat, in the breastpocket of which he hoped to find the military pass that might carry him safely out of Austria-Hungary and into Lutha. On the foot of the bed he found some garments. Gingerly he felt them over, seeking the coat.

At last he found it. His fingers, steady even under the nervous tension of this unaccustomed labor, discovered the inner pocket and the folded paper. There were several of them; Barney took them all.

So far he made no noise. None of the sleepers had stirred. Now he took a step toward the doorway and--kicked a shoe that lay in his path. The slight noise in that quiet room sounded to Barney's ears like the fall of a brick wall. Peter of Blentz stirred, turning in his sleep. Behind him Barney heard one of the men in the other bed move. He turned his head in that direction. Either Maenck or Coblich was sitting up peering through the darkness.

"Is that you, Prince Peter?" The voice was Maenck's.

"What's the matter?" persisted Maenck.

"I'm going for a drink of water," replied the American, and stepped toward the door.

Behind him Peter of Blentz sat up in bed.

"That you, Maenck?" he called.

Instantly Maenck was out of bed, for the first voice had come from the vicinity of the doorway; both could not be Peter's.

"Quick!" he cried; "there's someone in our room."

Barney leaped for the doorway, and upon his heels came the three conspirators. Maenck was closest to him--so close that Barney was forced to turn at the top of the stairs. In the darkness he was just conscious of the form of the man who was almost upon him. Then he swung a vicious blow for the other's face--a blow that landed, for there was a cry of pain and anger as Maenck stumbled back into the arms of the two behind him. From below came the sound of footsteps hurrying up the stairs to the accompaniment of a clanking saber. Barney's retreat was cut off.

Turning, he dodged into his own room before the enemy could locate him or even extricate themselves from the confusion of Maenck's sudden collision with the other two. But what could Barney gain by the slight delay that would be immediately followed by his apprehension?

He didn't know. All that he was sure of was that there had been no other place to go than this little room. As he entered the first thing that his eyes fell upon was the small square window. Here at least was some slight encouragement.

He ran toward it. The lower sash was raised. As the door behind him opened to admit Peter of Blentz and his companions, Barney slipped through into the night,

hanging by his hands from the sill without. What lay beneath or how far the drop he could not guess, but that certain death menaced him from above he knew from the conversation he had overheard earlier in the evening.

For an instant he hung suspended. He heard the men groping about the room. Evidently they were in some fear of the unknown assailant they sought, for they did not move about with undue rashness. Presently one of them struck a light--Barney could see its flare lighten the window casing for an instant.

"The room is empty," came a voice from above him.

"Look to the window!" cried Peter of Blentz, and then Barney Custer let go his hold upon the sill and dropped into the blackness below.

His fall was a short one, for the window had been directly over a low shed at the side of the inn. Upon the roof of this the American landed, and from there he dropped to the courtyard without mishap. Glancing up, he saw the heads of three men peering from the window of the room he had just quitted.

"There he is!" cried one, and instantly the three turned back into the room. As Barney fled from the courtyard he heard the rattle of hasty footsteps upon the rickety stairway of the inn.

Choosing an alley rather than a street in which he might run upon soldiers at any moment, he moved quickly yet cautiously away from the inn. Behind him he could hear the voices of many men. They were raised to a high pitch by excitement. It was clear to Barney that there were many more than the original three--Prince Peter had, in all probability, enlisted the aid of the military.

Could he but reach the frontier with his stolen passes he would be comparatively safe, for the rugged mountains of Lutha offered many places of concealment, and, too, there were few Luthanians who did not hate Peter of Blentz most cordially--among the men of the mountains at least. Once there he could defy a dozen Blentz princes for the little time that would be required to carry him into Serbia and comparative safety.

As he approached a cross street a couple of squares from the inn he found it necessary to pass beneath a street lamp. For a moment he paused in the shadows of the alley listening. Hearing nothing moving in the street, Barney was about to make a swift spring for the shadows upon the opposite side when it occurred to him that it might be safer to make assurance doubly sure by having a look up and down the street before emerging into the light.

It was just as well that he did, for as he thrust his head around the corner of the building the first thing that his eyes fell upon was the figure of an Austrian sentry, scarcely three paces from him. The soldier was standing in a listening attitude, his head half turned away from the American. The sounds coming from the direction of the inn were apparently what had attracted his attention.

Behind him, Barney was sure he heard evidences of pursuit. Before him was certain detection should he attempt to cross the street. On either hand rose the walls of buildings. That he was trapped there seemed little doubt.

He continued to stand motionless, watching the Austrian soldier. Should the fellow turn toward him, he had but to withdraw his head within the shadow of the building that hid his body. Possibly the man might turn and take his beat in the opposite direction. In which case Barney was sure he could dodge across the street, undetected.

Already the vague threat of pursuit from the direction of the inn had developed into a certainty--he could hear men moving toward him through the alley from the rear. Would the sentry never move! Evidently not, until he heard the others coming through the alley. Then he would turn, and the devil would be to pay for the American.

Barney was about hopeless. He had been in the war zone long enough to know that it might prove a very disagreeable matter to be caught sneaking through back alleys at night. There was a single chance--a sort of forlorn hope--and that was to risk fate and make a dash beneath the sentry's nose for the opposite alley mouth.

"Well, here goes," thought Barney. He had heard that many of the Austrians were excellent shots. Visions of Beatrice, Nebraska, swarmed his memory. They were pleasant visions, made doubly alluring by the thought that the realities of them might never again be for him.

He turned once more toward the sounds of pursuit--the men upon his track could not be over a square away--there was not an instant to be lost. And then from above him, upon the opposite side of the alley, came a low: "S-s-t!"

Barney looked up. Very dimly he could see the dark outline of a window some dozen feet from the pavement, and framed within it the lighter blotch that might have been a human face. Again came the challenging: "S-s-t!" Yes, there was someone above, signaling to him.

"S-s-t!" replied Barney. He knew that he had been discovered, and could think of no better plan for throwing the discoverer off his guard than to reply.

Then a soft voice floated down to him--a woman's voice!

"Is that you?" The tongue was Serbian. Barney could understand it, though he spoke it but indifferently.

"Yes," he replied truthfully.

"Thank Heaven!" came the voice from above. "I have been watching you, and thought you one of the Austrian pigs. Quick! They are coming--I can hear them;" and at the same instant Barney saw something drop from the window to the ground. He crossed the alley quickly, and could have shouted in relief for what he found there--the end of a knotted rope dangling from above.

His pursuers were almost upon him when he seized the rude ladder to clamber upward. At the window's ledge a firm, young hand reached out and, seizing his own, almost dragged him through the window. He turned to look back into the alley. He had been just in time; the Austrian sentry, alarmed by the sound of approaching footsteps down the alley, had stepped into view. He stood there now with leveled rifle, a challenge upon his lips. From the advancing party came a satisfactory reply.

At the same instant the girl beside him in the Stygian blackness of the room threw her arms about Barney's neck and drew his face down to hers.

"Oh, Stefan," she whispered, "what a narrow escape! It makes me tremble to think of it. They would have shot you, my Stefan!"

The American put an arm about the girl's shoulders, and raised one hand to her cheek--it might have been in caress, but it wasn't. It was to smother the cry of alarm he anticipated would follow the discovery that he was not "Stefan." He bent his lips close to her ear.

"Do not make an outcry," he whispered in very poor Serbian. "I am not Stefan; but I am a friend."

The exclamation of surprise or fright that he had expected was not forthcoming. The girl lowered her arms from about his neck.

"Who are you?" she asked in a low whisper.

"I am an American war correspondent," replied Barney, "but if the Austrians get hold of me now it will be mighty difficult to convince them that I am not a spy." And then a sudden determination came to him to trust his fate to this unknown girl, whose face, even, he had never seen. "I am entirely at your mercy," he said. "There are Austrian soldiers in the street below. You have but to call to them to

send me before the firing squad--or, you can let me remain here until I can find an opportunity to get away in safety. I am trying to reach Serbia."

"Why do you wish to reach Serbia?" asked the girl suspiciously.

"I have discovered too many enemies in Austria tonight to make it safe for me to remain," he replied, "and, further, my original intention was to report the war from the Serbian side."

The girl hesitated for a while, evidently in thought.

"They are moving on," suggested Barney. "If you are going to give me up you'd better do it at once."

"I'm not going to give you up," replied the girl. "I'm going to keep you prisoner until Stefan returns--he will know best what to do with you. Now you must come with me and be locked up. Do not try to escape--I have a revolver in my hand," and to give her prisoner physical proof of the weapon he could not see she thrust the muzzle against his side.

"I'll take your word for the gun," said Barney, "if you'll just turn it in the other direction. Go ahead--I'll follow you."

"No, you won't," replied the girl. "You'll go first; but before that you'll raise your hands above your head. I want to search you."

Barney did as he was bid and a moment later felt deft fingers running over his clothing in search of concealed weapons. Satisfied at last that he was unarmed, the girl directed him to precede her, guiding his steps from behind with a hand upon his arm. Occasionally he felt the muzzle of her revolver touch his body. It was a most unpleasant sensation.

They crossed the room to a door which his captor directed him to open, and after they had passed through and she had closed it behind them the girl struck a match and lit a candle which stood upon a little bracket on the partition wall. The dim light of the tallow dip showed Barney that he was in a narrow hall from which several doors opened into different rooms. At one end of the hall a stairway led to the floor below, while at the opposite end another flight disappeared into the darkness above.

"This way," said the girl, motioning toward the stairs that led upward.

Barney had turned toward her as she struck the match, obtaining an excellent view of her features. They were clear-cut and regular. Her eyes were large and very dark. Dark also was her hair, which was piled in great heaps upon her finely

shaped head. Altogether the face was one not easily to be forgotten. Barney could scarce have told whether the girl was beautiful or not, but that she was striking there could be no doubt.

He preceded her up the stairway to a door at the top. At her direction he turned the knob and entered a small room in which was a cot, an ancient dresser and a single chair.

"You will remain here," she said, "until Stefan returns. Stefan will know what to do with you." Then she left him, taking the light with her, and Barney heard a key turn in the lock of the door after she had closed it. Presently her footfalls died out as she descended to the lower floors.

"Anyhow," thought the American, "this is better than the Austrians. I don't know what Stefan will do with me, but I have a rather vivid idea of what the Austrians would have done to me if they'd caught me sneaking through the alleys of Burgova at midnight."

Throwing himself on the cot Barney was soon asleep, for though his predicament was one that, under ordinary circumstances might have made sleep impossible, yet he had so long been without the boon of slumber that tired nature would no longer be denied.

When he awoke it was broad daylight. The sun was pouring in through a skylight in the ceiling of his tiny chamber. Aside from this there were no windows in the room. The sound of voices came to him with an uncanny distinctness that made it seem that the speakers must be in this very chamber, but a glance about the blank walls convinced him that he was alone.

Presently he espied a small opening in the wall at the head of his cot. He rose and examined it. The voices appeared to be coming from it. In fact, they were. The opening was at the top of a narrow shaft that seemed to lead to the basement of the structure--apparently once the shaft of a dumb-waiter or a chute for refuse or soiled clothes.

Barney put his ear close to it. The voices that came from below were those of a man and a woman. He heard every word distinctly.

"We must search the house, fraulein," came in the deep voice of a man.

"Whom do you seek?" inquired a woman's voice. Barney recognized it as the voice of his captor.

"A Serbian spy, Stefan Drontoff," replied the man. "Do you know him?"

There was a considerable pause on the girl's part before she answered, and then her reply was in such a low voice that Barney could barely hear it.

"I do not know him," she said. "There are several men who lodge here. What may this Stefan Drontoff look like?"

"I have never seen him," replied the officer; "but by arresting all the men in the house we must get this Stefan also, if he is here."

"Oh!" cried the girl, a new note in her voice, "I guess I know now whom you mean. There is one man here I have heard them call Stefan, though for the moment I had forgotten it. He is in the small attic-room at the head of the stairs. Here is a key that will fit the lock. Yes, I am sure that he is Stefan. You will find him there, and it should be easy to take him, for I know that he is unarmed. He told me so last night when he came in."

"The devil!" muttered Barney Custer; but whether he referred to his predicament or to the girl it would be impossible to tell. Already the sound of heavy boots on the stairs announced the coming of men--several of them. Barney heard the rattle of accouterments--the clank of a scabbard--the scraping of gun butts against the walls. The Austrians were coming!

He looked about. There was no way of escape except the door and the skylight, and the door was impossible.

Quickly he tilted the cot against the door, wedging its legs against a crack in the floor--that would stop them for a minute or two. Then he wheeled the dresser beneath the skylight and, placing the chair on top of it, scrambled to the seat of the latter. His head was at the height of the skylight. To force the skylight from its frame required but a moment. A key entered the lock of the door from the opposite side and turned. He knew that someone without was pushing. Then he heard an oath and heavy battering upon the panels. A moment later he had drawn himself through the skylight and stood upon the roof of the building. Before him stretched a series of uneven roofs to the end of the street. Barney did not hesitate. He started on a rapid trot toward the adjoining roof. From that he clambered to a higher one beyond.

On he went, now leaping narrow courts, now dropping to low sheds and again clambering to the heights of the higher buildings, until he had come almost to the end of the row. Suddenly, behind him he heard a hoarse shout, followed by the report of a rifle. With a whir, a bullet flew a few inches above his head. He had gained the last roof--a large, level roof--and at the shot he turned to see how near to him were his pursuers.

Fatal turn!

Scarce had he taken his eyes from the path ahead than his foot fell upon a glass skylight, and with a loud crash he plunged through amid a shower of broken glass.

His fall was a short one. Directly beneath the skylight was a bed, and on the bed a fat Austrian infantry captain. Barney lit upon the pit of the captain's stomach. With a howl of pain the officer catapulted Barney to the floor. There were three other beds in the room, and in each bed one or two other officers. Before the American could regain his feet they were all sitting on him--all except the infantry captain. He lay shrieking and cursing in a painful attempt to regain his breath, every atom of which Barney had knocked out of him.

The officers sitting on Barney alternately beat him and questioned him, interspersing their interrogations with lurid profanity.

"If you will get off of me," at last shouted the American, "I shall be glad to explain--and apologize."

They let him up, scowling ferociously. He had promised to explain, but now that he was confronted by the immediate necessity of an explanation that would prove at all satisfactory as to how he happened to be wandering around the rooftops of Burgova, he discovered that his powers of invention were entirely inadequate. The need for explaining, however, was suddenly removed. A shadow fell upon them from above, and as they glanced up Barney saw the figure of an officer surrounded by several soldiers looking down upon him.

"Ah, you have him!" cried the newcomer in evident satisfaction. "It is well. Hold him until we descend."

A moment later he and his escort had dropped through the broken skylight to the floor beside them.

"Who is the mad man?" cried the captain who had broken Barney's fall. "The assassin! He tried to murder me."

"I cannot doubt it," replied the officer who had just descended, "for the fellow is no other than Stefan Drontoff, the famous Serbian spy!"

"Himmel!" ejaculated the officers in chorus. "You have done a good days' work, lieutenant."

"The firing squad will do a better work in a few minutes," replied the lieutenant, with a grim pointedness that took Barney's breath away.