

Chapter III - BEFORE THE FIRING SQUAD

They marched Barney before the staff where he urged his American nationality, pointing to his credentials and passes in support of his contention.

The general before whom he had been brought shrugged his shoulders. "They are all Americans as soon as they are caught," he said; "but why did you not claim to be Prince Peter of Blentz? You have his passes as well. How can you expect us to believe your story when you have in your possession passes for different men?"

"We have every respect for our friends the Americans. I would even stretch a point rather than chance harming an American; but you will admit that the evidence is all against you. You were found in the very building where Drontoff was known to stay while in Burgova. The young woman whose mother keeps the place directed our officer to your room, and you tried to escape, which I do not think that an innocent American would have done.

"However, as I have said, I will go to almost any length rather than chance a mistake in the case of one who from his appearance might pass more readily for an American than a Serbian. I have sent for Prince Peter of Blentz. If you can satisfactorily explain to him how you chance to be in possession of military passes bearing his name I shall be very glad to give you the benefit of every other doubt."

Peter of Blentz. Send for Peter of Blentz! Barney wondered just what kind of a sensation it was to stand facing a firing squad. He hoped that his knees wouldn't tremble--they felt a trifle weak even now. There was a chance that the man might not recall his face, but a very slight chance. It had been his remarkable likeness to Leopold of Lutha that had resulted in the snatching of a crown from Prince Peter's head.

Likely indeed that he would ever forget his, Barney's, face, though he had seen it but once without the red beard that had so added to Barney's likeness to the king. But Maenck would be along, of course, and Maenck would have no doubts--he had seen Barney too recently in Beatrice to fail to recognize him now.

Several men were entering the room where Barney stood before the general and his staff. A glance revealed to the prisoner that Peter of Blentz had come, and with him Von Coblich and Maenck. At the same instant Peter's eyes met Barney's, and the former, white and wide-eyed came almost to a dead halt, grasping hurriedly at the arm of Maenck who walked beside him.

"My God!" was all that Barney heard him say, but he spoke a name that the American did not hear. Maenck also looked his surprise, but his expression was suddenly changed to one of malevolent cunning and gratification. He turned toward Prince Peter with a few low-whispered words. A look of relief crossed the face of the Blentz prince.

"You appear to know the gentleman," said the general who had been conducting Barney's examination. "He has been arrested as a Serbian spy, and military passes in your name were found upon his person together with the papers of an American newspaper correspondent, which he claims to be. He is charged with being Stefan Drontoff, whom we long have been anxious to apprehend. Do you chance to know anything about him, Prince Peter?"

"Yes," replied Peter of Blentz, "I know him well by sight. He entered my room last night and stole the military passes from my coat--we all saw him and pursued him, but he got away in the dark. There can be no doubt but that he is the Serbian spy."

"He insists that he is Bernard Custer, an American," urged the general, who, it seemed to Barney, was anxious to make no mistake, and to give the prisoner every reasonable chance--a state of mind that rather surprised him in a European military chieftain, all of whom appeared to share the popular obsession regarding the prevalence of spies.

"Pardon me, general," interrupted Maenck. "I am well acquainted with Mr. Custer, who spent some time in Lutha a couple of years ago. This man is not he."

"That is sufficient, gentlemen, I thank you," said the general. He did not again look at the prisoner, but turned to a lieutenant who stood near-by. "You may remove the prisoner," he directed. "He will be destroyed with the others--here is the order," and he handed the subaltern a printed form upon which many names were filled in and at the bottom of which the general had just signed his own. It had evidently been waiting the outcome of the examination of Stefan Drontoff.

Surrounded by soldiers, Barney Custer walked from the presence of the military court. It was to him as though he moved in a strange world of dreams. He saw the look of satisfaction upon the face of Peter of Blentz as he passed him, and the open sneer of Maenck. As yet he did not fully realize what it all meant--that he was marching to his death! For the last time he was looking upon the faces of his fellow men; for the last time he had seen the sun rise, never again to see it set.

He was to be "destroyed." He had heard that expression used many times in connection with useless horses, or vicious dogs. Mechanically he drew a cigarette from his pocket and lighted it. There was no bravado in the act. On the contrary

it was done almost unconsciously. The soldiers marched him through the streets of Burgova. The men were entirely impassive--even so early in the war they had become accustomed to this grim duty. The young officer who commanded them was more nervous than the prisoner--it was his first detail with a firing squad. He looked wonderingly at Barney, expecting momentarily to see the man collapse, or at least show some sign of terror at his close impending fate; but the American walked silently toward his death, puffing leisurely at his cigarette.

At last, after what seemed a long time, his guard turned in at a large gateway in a brick wall surrounding a factory. As they entered Barney saw twenty or thirty men in civilian dress, guarded by a dozen infantrymen. They were standing before the wall of a low brick building. Barney noticed that there were no windows in the wall. It suddenly occurred to him that there was something peculiarly grim and sinister in the appearance of the dead, blank surface of weather-stained brick. For the first time since he had faced the military court he awakened to a full realization of what it all meant to him--he was going to be lined up against that ominous brick wall with these other men--they were going to shoot them.

A momentary madness seized him. He looked about upon the other prisoners and guards. A sudden break for liberty might give him temporary respite. He could seize a rifle from the nearest soldier, and at least have the satisfaction of selling his life dearly. As he looked he saw more soldiers entering the factory yard.

A sudden apathy overwhelmed him. What was the use? He could not escape. Why should he wish to kill these soldiers? It was not they who were responsible for his plight--they were but obeying orders. The close presence of death made life seem very desirable. These men, too, desired life. Why should he take it from them uselessly. At best he might kill one or two, but in the end he would be killed as surely as though he took his place before the brick wall with the others.

He noticed now that these others evinced no inclination to contest their fates. Why should he, then? Doubtless many of them were as innocent as he, and all loved life as well. He saw that several were weeping silently. Others stood with bowed heads gazing at the hard-packed earth of the factory yard. Ah, what visions were their eyes beholding for the last time! What memories of happy firesides! What dear, loved faces were limned upon that sordid clay!

His reveries were interrupted by the hoarse voice of a sergeant, breaking rudely in upon the silence and the dumb terror. The fellow was herding the prisoners into position. When he was done Barney found himself in the front rank of the little, hopeless band. Opposite them, at a few paces, stood the firing squad, their gun butts resting upon the ground.

The young lieutenant stood at one side. He issued some instructions in a low tone, then he raised his voice.

"Ready!" he commanded. Fascinated by the horror of it, Barney watched the rifles raised smartly to the soldiers' hips--the movement was as precise as though the men were upon parade. Every bolt clicked in unison with its fellows.

"Aim!" the pieces leaped to the hollows of the men's shoulders. The leveled barrels were upon a line with the breasts of the condemned. A man at Barney's right moaned. Another sobbed.

"Fire!" There was the hideous roar of the volley. Barney Custer crumpled forward to the ground, and three bodies fell upon his. A moment later there was a second volley--all had not fallen at the first. Then the soldiers came among the bodies, searching for signs of life; but evidently the two volleys had done their work. The sergeant formed his men in line. The lieutenant marched them away. Only silence remained on guard above the pitiful dead in the factory yard.

The day wore on and still the stiffening corpses lay where they had fallen. Twilight came and then darkness. A head appeared above the top of the wall that had enclosed the grounds. Eyes peered through the night and keen ears listened for any sign of life within. At last, evidently satisfied that the place was deserted, a man crawled over the summit of the wall and dropped to the ground within. Here again he paused, peering and listening.

What strange business had he here among the dead that demanded such caution in its pursuit? Presently he advanced toward the pile of corpses. Quickly he tore open coats and searched pockets. He ran his fingers along the fingers of the dead. Two rings had rewarded his search and he was busy with a third that encircled the finger of a body that lay beneath three others. It would not come off. He pulled and tugged, and then he drew a knife from his pocket.

But he did not sever the digit. Instead he shrank back with a muffled scream of terror. The corpse that he would have mutilated had staggered suddenly to its feet, flinging the dead bodies to one side as it rose.

"You fiend!" broke from the lips of the dead man, and the ghoul turned and fled, gibbering in his fright.

The tramp of soldiers in the street beyond ceased suddenly at the sound from within the factory yard. It was a detail of the guard marching to the relief of sentries. A moment later the gates swung open and a score of soldiers entered. They saw a figure dodging toward the wall a dozen paces from them, but they did not see the other that ran swiftly around the corner of the factory.

This other was Barney Custer of Beatrice. When the command to fire had been given to the squad of riflemen, a single bullet had creased the top of his head, stunning him. All day he had lain there unconscious. It had been the tugging of the ghoul at his ring that had roused him to life at last.

Behind him, as he scurried around the end of the factory building, he heard the scattering fire of half a dozen rifles, followed by a scream--the fleeing hyena had been hit. Barney crouched in the shadow of a pile of junk. He heard the voices of soldiers as they gathered about the wounded man, questioning him, and a moment later the imperious tones of an officer issuing instructions to his men to search the yard. That he must be discovered seemed a certainty to the American. He crouched further back in the shadows close to the wall, stepping with the utmost caution.

Presently to his chagrin his foot touched the metal cover of a manhole; there was a resultant rattling that smote upon Barney's ears and nerves with all the hideous clatter of a boiler shop. He halted, petrified, for an instant. He was no coward, but after being so near death, life had never looked more inviting, and he knew that to be discovered meant certain extinction this time.

The soldiers were circling the building. Already he could hear them nearing his position. In another moment they would round the corner of the building and be upon him. For an instant he contemplated a bold rush for the fence. In fact, he had gathered himself for the leaping start and the quick sprint across the open under the noses of the soldiers who still remained beside the dying ghoul, when his mind suddenly reverted to the manhole beneath his feet. Here lay a hiding place, at least until the soldiers had departed.

Barney stooped and raised the heavy lid, sliding it to one side. How deep was the black chasm beneath he could not even guess. Doubtless it led into a coal bunker, or it might open over a pit of great depth. There was no way to discover other than to plumb the abyss with his body. Above was death--below, a chance of safety.

The soldiers were quite close when Barney lowered himself through the manhole. Clinging with his fingers to the upper edge his feet still swung in space. How far beneath was the bottom? He heard the scraping of the heavy shoes of the searchers close above him, and then he closed his eyes, released the grasp of his fingers, and dropped.