

## **Chapter IV - A RACE TO LUTHA**

Barney's fall was not more than four or five feet. He found himself upon a slippery floor of masonry over which two or three inches of water ran sluggishly. Above him he heard the soldiers pass the open manhole. It was evident that in the darkness they had missed it.

For a few minutes the fugitive remained motionless, then, hearing no sounds from above he started to grope about his retreat. Upon two sides were blank, circular walls, upon the other two circular openings about four feet in diameter. It was through these openings that the tiny stream of water trickled.

Barney came to the conclusion that he had dropped into a sewer. To get out the way he had entered appeared impossible. He could not leap upward from the slimy, concave bottom the distance he had dropped. To follow the sewer upward would lead him nowhere nearer escape. There remained no hope but to follow the trickling stream downward toward the river, into which his judgment told him the entire sewer system of the city must lead.

Stooping, he entered the ill-smelling circular conduit, groping his way slowly along. As he went the water deepened. It was half way to his knees when he plunged unexpectedly into another tube running at right angles to the first. The bottom of this tube was lower than that of the one which emptied into it, so that Barney now found himself in a swiftly running stream of filth that reached above his knees. Downward he followed this flood--faster now for the fear of the deadly gases which might overpower him before he could reach the river.

The water deepened gradually as he went on. At last he reached a point where, with his head scraping against the roof of the sewer, his chin was just above the surface of the stream. A few more steps would be all that he could take in this direction without drowning. Could he retrace his way against the swift current? He did not know. He was weakened from the effects of his wound, from lack of food and from the exertions of the past hour. Well, he would go on as far as he could. The river lay ahead of him somewhere. Behind was only the hostile city.

He took another step. His foot found no support. He surged backward in an attempt to regain his footing, but the power of the flood was too much for him. He was swept forward to plunge into water that surged above his head as he sank. An instant later he had regained the surface and as his head emerged he opened his eyes.

He looked up into a starlit heaven! He had reached the mouth of the sewer and was in the river. For a moment he lay still, floating upon his back to rest. Above him he heard the tread of a sentry along the river front, and the sound of men's voices.

The sweet, fresh air, the star-shot void above, acted as a powerful tonic to his shattered hopes and overwrought nerves. He lay inhaling great lungfuls of pure, invigorating air. He listened to the voices of the Austrian soldiery above him. All the buoyancy of his inherent Americanism returned to him.

"This is no place for a minister's son," he murmured, and turning over struck out for the opposite shore. The river was not wide, and Barney was soon nearing the bank along which he could see occasional camp fires. Here, too, were Austrians. He dropped down-stream below these, and at last approached the shore where a wood grew close to the water's edge. The bank here was steep, and the American had some difficulty in finding a place where he could clamber up the precipitous wall of rock. But finally he was successful, finding himself in a little clump of bushes on the river's brim. Here he lay resting and listening--always listening. It seemed to Barney that his ears ached with the constant strain of unflagging duty that his very existence demanded of them.

Hearing nothing, he crawled at last from his hiding place with the purpose of making his way toward the south and to the frontier as rapidly as possible. He could hope only to travel by night, and he guessed that this night must be nearly spent. Stooping, he moved cautiously away from the river. Through the shadows of the wood he made his way for perhaps a hundred yards when he was suddenly confronted by a figure that stepped from behind the bole of a tree.

"Halt! Who goes there?" came the challenge.

Barney's heart stood still. With all his care he had run straight into the arms of an Austrian sentry. To run would be to be shot. To advance would mean capture, and that too would mean death.

For the barest fraction of an instant he hesitated, and then his quick American wits came to his aid. Feigning intoxication he answered the challenge in dubious Austrian that he hoped his maudlin tongue would excuse.

"Friend," he answered thickly. "Friend with a drink--have one?" And he staggered drunkenly forward, banking all upon the credulity and thirst of the soldier who confronted him with fixed bayonet.

That the sentry was both credulous and thirsty was evidenced by the fact that he let Barney come within reach of his gun. Instantly the drunken Austrian was

transformed into a very sober and active engine of destruction. Seizing the barrel of the piece Barney jerked it to one side and toward him, and at the same instant he leaped for the throat of the sentry.

So quickly was this accomplished that the Austrian had time only for a single cry, and that was choked in his windpipe by the steel fingers of the American. Together both men fell heavily to the ground, Barney retaining his hold upon the other's throat.

Striking and clutching at one another they fought in silence for a couple of minutes, then the soldier's struggles began to weaken. He squirmed and gasped for breath. His mouth opened and his tongue protruded. His eyes started from their sockets. Barney closed his fingers more tightly upon the bearded throat. He rained heavy blows upon the upturned face. The beating fists of his adversary waved wildly now--the blows that reached Barney were pitifully weak. Presently they ceased. The man struggled violently for an instant, twitched spasmodically and lay still.

Barney clung to him for several minutes longer, until there was not the slightest indication of remaining life. The perpetration of the deed sickened him; but he knew that his act was warranted, for it had been either his life or the other's. He dragged the body back to the bushes in which he had been hiding. There he stripped off the Austrian uniform, put his own clothes upon the corpse and rolled it into the river.

Dressed as an Austrian private, Barney Custer shouldered the dead soldier's gun and walked boldly through the wood to the south. Momentarily he expected to run upon other soldiers, but though he kept straight on his way for hours he encountered none. The thin line of sentries along the river had been posted only to double the preventive measures that had been taken to keep Serbian spies either from entering or leaving the city.

Toward dawn, at the darkest period of the night, Barney saw lights ahead of him. Apparently he was approaching a village. He went more cautiously now, but all his care did not prevent him from running for the second time that night almost into the arms of a sentry. This time, however, Barney saw the soldier before he himself was discovered. It was upon the edge of the town, in an orchard, that the sentinel was posted. Barney, approaching through the trees, darting from one to another, was within a few paces of the man before he saw him.

The American remained quietly in the shadow of a tree waiting for an opportunity to escape, but before it came he heard the approach of a small body of troops. They were coming from the village directly toward the orchard. They passed the

sentry and marched within a dozen feet of the tree behind which Barney was hiding.

As they came opposite him he slipped around the tree to the opposite side. The sentry had resumed his pacing, and was now out of sight momentarily among the trees further on. He could not see the American, but there were others who could. They came in the shape of a non-commissioned officer and a detachment of the guard to relieve the sentry. Barney almost bumped into them as he rounded the tree. There was no escape--the non-commissioned officer was within two feet of him when Barney discovered him. "What are you doing here?" shouted the sergeant with an oath. "Your post is there," and he pointed toward the position where Barney had seen the sentry.

At first Barney could scarce believe his ears. In the darkness the sergeant had mistaken him for the sentinel! Could he carry it out? And if so might it not lead him into worse predicament? No, Barney decided, nothing could be worse. To be caught masquerading in the uniform of an Austrian soldier within the Austrian lines was to plumb the uttermost depth of guilt--nothing that he might do now could make his position worse.

He faced the sergeant, snapping his piece to present, hoping that this was the proper thing to do. Then he stumbled through a brief excuse. The officer in command of the troops that had just passed had demanded the way of him, and he had but stepped a few paces from his post to point out the road to his superior.

The sergeant grunted and ordered him to fall in. Another man took his place on duty. They were far from the enemy and discipline was lax, so the thing was accomplished which under other circumstances would have been well nigh impossible. A moment later Barney found himself marching back toward the village, to all intents and purposes an Austrian private.

Before a low, windowless shed that had been converted into barracks for the guard, the detail was dismissed. The men broke ranks and sought their blankets within the shed, tired from their lonely vigil upon sentry duty.

Barney loitered until the last. All the others had entered. He dared not, for he knew that any moment the sentry upon the post from which he had been taken would appear upon the scene, after discovering another of his comrades. He was certain to inquire of the sergeant. They would be puzzled, of course, and, being soldiers, they would be suspicious. There would be an investigation, which would start in the barracks of the guard. That neighborhood would at once become a most unhealthy spot for Barney Custer, of Beatrice, Nebraska.

When the last of the soldiers had entered the shed Barney glanced quickly about. No one appeared to notice him. He walked directly past the doorway to the end of the building. Around this he found a yard, deeply shadowed. He entered it, crossed it, and passed out into an alley beyond. At the first cross-street his way was blocked by the sight of another sentry--the world seemed composed entirely of Austrian sentries. Barney wondered if the entire Austrian army was kept perpetually upon sentry duty; he had scarce been able to turn without bumping into one.

He turned back into the alley and at last found a crooked passageway between buildings that he hoped might lead him to a spot where there was no sentry, and from which he could find his way out of the village toward the south. The passage, after devious windings, led into a large, open court, but when Barney attempted to leave the court upon the opposite side he found the ubiquitous sentries upon guard there.

Evidently there would be no escape while the Austrians remained in the town. There was nothing to do, therefore, but hide until the happy moment of their departure arrived. He returned to the courtyard, and after a short search discovered a shed in one corner that had evidently been used to stable a horse, for there was straw at one end of it and a stall in the other. Barney sat down upon the straw to wait developments. Tired nature would be denied no longer. His eyes closed, his head drooped upon his breast. In three minutes from the time he entered the shed he was stretched full length upon the straw, fast asleep.

The chugging of a motor awakened him. It was broad daylight. Many sounds came from the courtyard without. It did not take Barney long to gather his scattered wits--in an instant he was wide awake. He glanced about. He was the only occupant of the shed. Rising, he approached a small window that looked out upon the court. All was life and movement. A dozen military cars either stood about or moved in and out of the wide gates at the opposite end of the enclosure. Officers and soldiers moved briskly through a doorway that led into a large building that flanked the court upon one side. While Barney slept the headquarters of an Austrian army corps had moved in and taken possession of the building, the back of which abutted upon the court where lay his modest little shed.

Barney took it all in at a single glance, but his eyes hung long and greedily upon the great, high-powered machines that chugged or purred about him.

Gad! If he could but be behind the wheel of such a car for an hour! The frontier could not be over fifty miles to the south, of that he was quite positive; and what would fifty miles be to one of those machines?

Barney sighed as a great, gray-painted car whizzed into the courtyard and pulled up before the doorway. Two officers jumped out and ran up the steps. The driver, a young man in a uniform not unlike that which Barney wore, drew the car around to the end of the courtyard close beside Barney's shed. Here he left it and entered the building into which his passengers had gone. By reaching through the window Barney could have touched the fender of the machine. A few seconds' start in that and it would take more than an Austrian army corps to stop him this side of the border. Thus mused Barney, knowing already that the mad scheme that had been born within his brain would be put to action before he was many minutes older.

There were many soldiers on guard about the courtyard. The greatest danger lay in arousing the suspicions of one of these should he chance to see Barney emerge from the shed and enter the car.

"The proper thing," thought Barney, "is to come from the building into which everyone seems to pass, and the only way to be seen coming out of it is to get into it; but how the devil am I to get into it?"

The longer he thought the more convinced he became that utter recklessness and boldness would be his only salvation. Briskly he walked from the shed out into the courtyard beneath the eyes of the sentries, the officers, the soldiers, and the military drivers. He moved straight among them toward the doorway of the headquarters as though bent upon important business--which, indeed, he was. At least it was quite the most important business to Barney Custer that that young gentleman could recall having ventured upon for some time.

No one paid the slightest attention to him. He had left his gun in the shed for he noticed that only the men on guard carried them. Without an instant's hesitation he ran briskly up the short flight of steps and entered the headquarters building. Inside was another sentry who barred his way questioningly. Evidently one must state one's business to this person before going farther. Barney, without any loss of time or composure, stepped up to the guard.

"Has General Kampf passed in this morning?" he asked blithely. Barney had never heard of any "General Kampf," nor had the sentry, since there was no such person in the Austrian army. But he did know, however, that there were altogether too many generals for any one soldier to know the names of them all.

"I do not know the general by sight," replied the sentry.

Here was a pretty mess, indeed. Doubtless the sergeant would know a great deal more than would be good for Barney Custer. The young man looked toward the door through which he had just entered. His sole object in coming into the

spider's parlor had been to make it possible for him to come out again in full view of all the guards and officers and military chauffeurs, that their suspicions might not be aroused when he put his contemplated coup to the test.

He glanced toward the door. Machines were whizzing in and out of the courtyard. Officers on foot were passing and repassing. The sentry in the hallway was on the point of calling his sergeant.

"Ah!" cried Barney. "There is the general now," and without waiting to cast even a parting glance at the guard he stepped quickly through the doorway and ran down the steps into the courtyard. Looking neither to right nor to left, and with a convincing air of self-confidence and important business, he walked directly to the big, gray machine that stood beside the little shed at the end of the courtyard.

To crank it and leap to the driver's seat required but a moment. The big car moved smoothly forward. A turn of the steering wheel brought it around headed toward the wide gates. Barney shifted to second speed, stepped on the accelerator and the cut-out simultaneously, and with a noise like the rattle of a machine gun, shot out of the courtyard.

None who saw his departure could have guessed from the manner of it that the young man at the wheel of the gray car was stealing the machine or that his life depended upon escape without detection. It was the very boldness of his act that crowned it with success.

Once in the street Barney turned toward the south. Cars were passing up and down in both directions, usually at high speed. Their numbers protected the fugitive. Momentarily he expected to be halted; but he passed out of the village without mishap and reached a country road which, except for a lane down its center along which automobiles were moving, was blocked with troops marching southward. Through this soldier-walled lane Barney drove for half an hour.

From a great distance, toward the southeast, he could hear the boom of cannon and the bursting of shells. Presently the road forked. The troops were moving along the road on the left toward the distant battle line. Not a man or machine was turning into the right fork, the road toward the south that Barney wished to take.

Could he successfully pass through the marching soldiers at his right? Among all those officers there surely would be one who would question the purpose and destination of this private soldier who drove alone in the direction of the nearby frontier.

The moment had come when he must stake everything on his ability to gain the open road beyond the plodding mass of troops. Diminishing the speed of the car Barney turned it in toward the marching men at the same time sounding his horn loudly. An infantry captain, marching beside his company, was directly in front of the car. He looked up at the American. Barney saluted and pointed toward the right-hand fork.

The captain turned and shouted a command to his men. Those who had not passed in front of the car halted. Barney shot through the little lane they had opened, which immediately closed up behind him. He was through! He was upon the open road! Ahead, as far as he could see, there was no sign of any living creature to bar his way, and the frontier could not be more than twenty-five miles away.