

Chapter V - THE TRAITOR KING

In his castle at Lustadt, Leopold of Lutha paced nervously back and forth between his great desk and the window that overlooked the royal gardens. Upon the opposite side of the desk stood an old man--a tall, straight, old man with the bearing of a soldier and the head of a lion. His keen, gray eyes were upon the king, and sorrow was written upon his face. He was Ludwig von der Tann, chancellor of the kingdom of Lutha.

At last the king stopped his pacing and faced the old man, though he could not meet those eagle eyes squarely, try as he would. It was his inability to do so, possibly, that added to his anger. Weak himself, he feared this strong man and envied him his strength, which, in a weak nature, is but a step from hatred. There evidently had been a long pause in their conversation, yet the king's next words took up the thread of their argument where it had broken.

"You speak as though I had no right to do it," he snapped. "One might think that you were the king from the manner with which you upbraid and reproach me. I tell you, Prince von der Tann, that I shall stand it no longer."

The king approached the desk and pounded heavily upon its polished surface with his fist. The physical act of violence imparted to him a certain substitute for the moral courage which he lacked.

"I will tell you, sir, that I am king. It was not necessary that I consult you or any other man before pardoning Prince Peter and his associates. I have investigated the matter thoroughly and I am convinced that they have been taught a sufficient lesson and that hereafter they will be my most loyal subjects."

He hesitated. "Their presence here," he added, "may prove an antidote to the ambitions of others who lately have taken it upon themselves to rule Lutha for me."

There was no mistaking the king's meaning, but Prince Ludwig did not show by any change of expression that the shot had struck him in a vulnerable spot; nor, upon the other hand, did he ignore the insinuation. There was only sorrow in his voice when he replied.

"Sire," he said, "for some time I have been aware of the activity of those who would like to see Peter of Blentz returned to favor with your majesty. I have warned you, only to see that my motives were always misconstrued. There is a greater power at work, your majesty, than any of us--greater than Lutha itself. One that will stop at nothing in order to gain its ends. It cares naught for Peter of

Blentz, naught for me, naught for you. It cares only for Lutha. For strategic purposes it must have Lutha. It will trample you under foot to gain its end, and then it will cast Peter of Blentz aside. You have insinuated, sire, that I am ambitious. I am. I am ambitious to maintain the integrity and freedom of Lutha.

"For three hundred years the Von der Tanns have labored and fought for the welfare of Lutha. It was a Von der Tann that put the first Rubinroth king upon the throne of Lutha. To the last they were loyal to the former dynasty while that dynasty was loyal to Lutha. Only when the king attempted to sell the freedom of his people to a powerful neighbor did the Von der Tanns rise against him.

"Sire! the Von der Tanns have always been loyal to the house of Rubinroth. And but a single thing rises superior within their breasts to that loyalty, and that is their loyalty to Lutha." He paused for an instant before concluding. "And I, sire, am a Von der Tann."

There could be no mistaking the old man's meaning. So long as Leopold was loyal to his people and their interests Ludwig von der Tann would be loyal to Leopold. The king was cowed. He was very much afraid of this grim old warrior. He chafed beneath his censure.

"You are always scolding me," he cried irritably. "I am getting tired of it. And now you threaten me. Do you call that loyalty? Do you call it loyalty to refuse to compel your daughter to keep her plighted troth? If you wish to prove your loyalty command the Princess Emma to fulfil the promise you made my father-- command her to wed me at once."

Von der Tann looked the king straight in the eyes.

"I cannot do that," he said. "She has told me that she will kill herself rather than wed with your majesty. She is all I have left, sire. What good would be accomplished by robbing me of her if you could not gain her by the act? Win her confidence and love, sire. It may be done. Thus only may happiness result to you and to her."

"You see," exclaimed the king, "what your loyalty amounts to! I believe that you are saving her for the impostor--I have heard as much hinted at before this. Nor do I doubt that she would gladly connive with the fellow if she thought there was a chance of his seizing the throne."

Von der Tann paled. For the first time righteous indignation and anger got the better of him. He took a step toward the king.

"Stop!" he commanded. "No man, not even my king, may speak such words to a Von der Tann."

In an antechamber just outside the room a man sat near the door that led into the apartment where the king and his chancellor quarreled. He had been straining his ears to catch the conversation which he could hear rising and falling in the adjoining chamber, but till now he had been unsuccessful. Then came Prince Ludwig's last words booming loudly through the paneled door, and the man smiled. He was Count Zellerndorf, the Austrian minister to Lutha.

The king's outraged majesty goaded him to an angry retort.

"You forget yourself, Prince von der Tann," he cried. "Leave our presence. When we again desire to be insulted we shall send for you."

As the chancellor passed into the antechamber Count Zellerndorf rose and greeted him warmly, almost effusively. Von der Tann returned his salutations with courtesy but with no answering warmth. Then he passed on out of the palace.

"The old fox must have heard," he mused as he mounted his horse and turned his face toward Tann and the Old Forest.

When Count Zellerndorf of Austria entered the presence of Leopold of Lutha he found that young ruler much disturbed. He had resumed his restless pacing between desk and window, and as the Austrian entered he scarce paused to receive his salutation. Count Zellerndorf was a frequent visitor at the palace. There were few formalities between this astute diplomat and the young king; those had passed gradually away as their acquaintance and friendship ripened.

"Prince Ludwig appeared angry when he passed through the antechamber," ventured Zellerndorf. "Evidently your majesty found cause to rebuke him."

The king nodded and looked narrowly at the Austrian. "The Prince von der Tann insinuated that Austria's only wish in connection with Lutha is to seize her," he said.

Zellerndorf raised his hands in well-simulated horror.

"Your majesty!" he exclaimed. "It cannot be that the prince has gone to such lengths to turn you against your best friend, my emperor. If he has I can only attribute it to his own ambitions. I have hesitated to speak to you of this matter, your majesty, but now that the honor of my own ruler is questioned I must defend him."

"Bear with me then, should what I have to say wound you. I well know the confidence which the house of Von der Tann has enjoyed for centuries in Lutha; but I must brave your wrath in the interest of right. I must tell you that it is common gossip in Vienna that Von der Tann aspires to the throne of Lutha either for himself or for his daughter through the American impostor who once sat upon your throne for a few days. And let me tell you more.

"The American will never again menace you--he was arrested in Burgova as a spy and executed. He is dead; but not so are Von der Tann's ambitions. When he learns that he no longer may rely upon the strain of the Rubinroth blood that flowed in the veins of the American from his royal mother, the runaway Princess Victoria, there will remain to him only the other alternative of seizing the throne for himself. He is a very ambitious man, your majesty. Already he has caused it to become current gossip that he is the real power behind the throne of Lutha--that your majesty is but a figure-head, the puppet of Von der Tann."

Zellerndorf paused. He saw the flush of shame and anger that suffused the king's face, and then he shot the bolt that he had come to fire, but which he had not dared to hope would find its target so denuded of defense.

"Your majesty," he whispered, coming quite close to the king, "all Lutha is inclined to believe that you fear Prince von der Tann. Only a few of us know the truth to be the contrary. For the sake of your prestige you must take some step to counteract this belief and stamp it out for good and all. I have planned a way--hear it.

"Von der Tann's hatred of Peter of Blentz is well known. No man in Lutha believes that he would permit you to have any intercourse with Peter. I have brought from Blentz an invitation to your majesty to honor the Blentz prince with your presence as a guest for the ensuing week. Accept it, your majesty.

"Nothing could more conclusively prove to the most skeptical that you are still the king, and that Von der Tann, nor any other, may not dare to dictate to you. It will be the most splendid stroke of statesmanship that you could achieve at the present moment."

For an instant the king stood in thought. He still feared Peter of Blentz as the devil is reputed to fear holy water, though for converse reasons. Yet he was very angry with Von der Tann. It would indeed be an excellent way to teach the presumptuous chancellor his place.

Leopold almost smiled as he thought of the chagrin with which Prince Ludwig would receive the news that he had gone to Blentz as the guest of Peter. It was

the last impetus that was required by his weak, vindictive nature to press it to a decision.

"Very well," he said, "I will go tomorrow."

It was late the following day that Prince von der Tann received in his castle in the Old Forest word that an Austrian army had crossed the Luthanian frontier--the neutrality of Lutha had been violated. The old chancellor set out immediately for Lustadt. At the palace he sought an interview with the king only to learn that Leopold had departed earlier in the day to visit Peter of Blentz.

There was but one thing to do and that was to follow the king to Blentz. Some action must be taken immediately--it would never do to let this breach of treaty pass unnoticed.

The Serbian minister who had sent word to the chancellor of the invasion by the Austrian troops was closeted with him for an hour after his arrival at the palace. It was clear to both these men that the hand of Zellerndorf was plainly in evidence in both the important moves that had occurred in Lutha within the past twenty-four hours--the luring of the king to Blentz and the entrance of Austrian soldiery into Lutha.

Following his interview with the Serbian minister Von der Tann rode toward Blentz with only his staff in attendance. It was long past midnight when the lights of the town appeared directly ahead of the little party. They rode at a trot along the road which passes through the village to wind upward again toward the ancient feudal castle that looks down from its hilltop upon the town.

At the edge of the village Von der Tann was thunderstruck by a challenge from a sentry posted in the road, nor was his dismay lessened when he discovered that the man was an Austrian.

"What is the meaning of this?" he cried angrily. "What are Austrian soldiers doing barring the roads of Lutha to the chancellor of Lutha?"

The sentry called an officer. The latter was extremely suave. He regretted the incident, but his orders were most positive--no one could be permitted to pass through the lines without an order from the general commanding. He would go at once to the general and see if he could procure the necessary order. Would the prince be so good as to await his return? Von der Tann turned on the young officer, his face purpling with rage.

"I will pass nowhere within the boundaries of Lutha," he said, "upon the order of an Austrian. You may tell your general that my only regret is that I have not with

me tonight the necessary force to pass through his lines to my king--another time I shall not be so handicapped," and Ludwig, Prince von der Tann, wheeled his mount and spurred away in the direction of Lustadt, at his heels an extremely angry and revengeful staff.