

Chapter VI - A TRAP IS SPRUNG

Long before Prince von der Tann reached Lustadt he had come to the conclusion that Leopold was in virtue a prisoner in Blentz. To prove his conclusion he directed one of his staff to return to Blentz and attempt to have audience with the king.

"Risk anything," he instructed the officer to whom he had entrusted the mission. "Submit, if necessary, to the humiliation of seeking an Austrian pass through the lines to the castle. See the king at any cost and deliver this message to him and to him alone and secretly. Tell him my fears, and that if I do not have word from him within twenty-four hours I shall assume that he is indeed a prisoner.

"I shall then direct the mobilization of the army and take such steps as seem fit to rescue him and drive the invaders from the soil of Lutha. If you do not return I shall understand that you are held prisoner by the Austrians and that my worst fears have been realized."

But Prince Ludwig was one who believed in being forehanded and so it happened that the orders for the mobilization of the army of Lutha were issued within fifteen minutes of his return to Lustadt. It would do no harm, thought the old man, with a grim smile, to get things well under way a day ahead of time. This accomplished, he summoned the Serbian minister, with what purpose and to what effect became historically evident several days later. When, after twenty-four hours' absence, his aide had not returned from Blentz, the chancellor had no regrets for his forehandedness.

In the castle of Peter of Blentz the king of Lutha was being entertained royally. He was told nothing of the attempt of his chancellor to see him, nor did he know that a messenger from Prince von der Tann was being held a prisoner in the camp of the Austrians in the village. He was surrounded by the creatures of Prince Peter and by Peter's staunch allies, the Austrian minister and the Austrian officers attached to the expeditionary force occupying the town. They told him that they had positive information that the Serbians already had crossed the frontier into Lutha, and that the presence of the Austrian troops was purely for the protection of Lutha.

It was not until the morning following the rebuff of Prince von der Tann that Peter of Blentz, Count Zellerndorf and Maenck heard of the occurrence. They were chagrined by the accident, for they were not ready to deliver their final stroke. The young officer of the guard had, of course, but followed his instructions--who would have thought that old Von der Tann would come to Blentz! That he

suspected their motives seemed apparent, and now that his rebuff at the gates had aroused his ire and, doubtless, crystallized his suspicions, they might find in him a very ugly obstacle to the fruition of their plans.

With Von der Tann actively opposed to them, the value of having the king upon their side would be greatly minimized. The people and the army had every confidence in the old chancellor. Even if he opposed the king there was reason to believe that they might still side with him.

"What is to be done?" asked Zellerndorf. "Is there no way either to win or force Von der Tann to acquiescence?"

"I think we can accomplish it," said Prince Peter, after a moment of thought. "Let us see Leopold. His mind has been prepared to receive almost gratefully any insinuations against the loyalty of Von der Tann. With proper evidence the king may easily be persuaded to order the chancellor's arrest--possibly his execution as well."

So they saw the king, only to meet a stubborn refusal upon the part of Leopold to accede to their suggestions. He still was madly in love with Von der Tann's daughter, and he knew that a blow delivered at her father would only tend to increase her bitterness toward him. The conspirators were nonplussed.

They had looked for a comparatively easy road to the consummation of their desires. What in the world could be the cause of the king's stubborn desire to protect the man they knew he feared, hated, and mistrusted with all the energy of his suspicious nature? It was the king himself who answered their unspoken question.

"I cannot believe in the disloyalty of Prince Ludwig," he said, "nor could I, even if I desired it, take such drastic steps as you suggest. Some day the Princess Emma, his daughter, will be my queen."

Count Zellerndorf was the first to grasp the possibilities that lay in the suggestion the king's words carried.

"Your majesty," he cried, "there is a way to unite all factions in Lutha. It would be better to insure the loyalty of Von der Tann through bonds of kinship than to antagonize him. Marry the Princess Emma at once.

"Wait, your majesty," he added, as Leopold raised an objecting hand. "I am well informed as to the strange obstinacy of the princess, but for the welfare of the state--yes, for the sake of your very throne, sire--you should exert your royal

prerogatives and command the Princess Emma to carry out the terms of your betrothal."

"What do you mean, Zellerndorf?" asked the king.

"I mean, sire, that we should bring the princess here and compel her to marry you."

Leopold shook his head. "You do not know her," he said. "You do not know the Von der Tann nature--one cannot force a Von der Tann."

"Pardon, sire," urged Zellerndorf, "but I think it can be accomplished. If the Princess Emma knew that your majesty believed her father to be a traitor--that the order for his arrest and execution but awaited your signature--I doubt not that she would gladly become queen of Lutha, with her father's life and liberty as a wedding gift."

For several minutes no one spoke after Count Zellerndorf had ceased. Leopold sat looking at the toe of his boot. Peter of Blentz, Maenck, and the Austrian watched him intently. The possibilities of the plan were sinking deep into the minds of all four. At last the king rose. He was mumbling to himself as though unconscious of the presence of the others.

"She is a stubborn jade," he mumbled. "It would be an excellent lesson for her. She needs to be taught that I am her king," and then as though his conscience required a sop, "I shall be very good to her. Afterward she will be happy." He turned toward Zellerndorf. "You think it can be done?"

"Most assuredly, your majesty. We shall take immediate steps to fetch the Princess Emma to Blentz," and the Austrian rose and backed from the apartment lest the king change his mind. Prince Peter and Maenck followed him.

Princess Emma von der Tann sat in her boudoir in her father's castle in the Old Forest. Except for servants, she was alone in the fortress, for Prince von der Tann was in Lustadt. Her mind was occupied with memories of the young American who had entered her life under such strange circumstances two years before--memories that had been awakened by the return of Lieutenant Otto Butzow to Lutha. He had come directly to her father and had been attached to the prince's personal staff.

From him she had heard a great deal about Barney Custer, and the old interest, never a moment forgotten during these two years, was reawakened to all its former intensity.

Butzow had accompanied Prince Ludwig to Lustadt, but Princess Emma would not go with them. For two years she had not entered the capital, and much of that period had been spent in Paris. Only within the past fortnight had she returned to Lutha.

In the middle of the morning her reveries were interrupted by the entrance of a servant bearing a message. She had to read it twice before she could realize its purport; though it was plainly worded--the shock of it had stunned her. It was dated at Lustadt and signed by one of the palace functionaries:

Prince von der Tann has suffered a slight stroke. Do not be alarmed, but come at once. The two troopers who bear this message will act as your escort.

It required but a few minutes for the girl to change to her riding clothes, and when she ran down into the court she found her horse awaiting her in the hands of her groom, while close by two mounted troopers raised their hands to their helmets in salute.

A moment later the three clattered over the drawbridge and along the road that leads toward Lustadt. The escort rode a short distance behind the girl, and they were hard put to it to hold the mad pace which she set them.

A few miles from Tann the road forks. One branch leads toward the capital and the other winds over the hills in the direction of Blentz. The fork occurs within the boundaries of the Old Forest. Great trees overhang the winding road, casting a twilight shade even at high noon. It is a lonely spot, far from any habitation.

As the Princess Emma approached the fork she reined in her mount, for across the road to Lustadt a dozen horsemen barred her way. At first she thought nothing of it, turning her horse's head to the righthand side of the road to pass the party, all of whom were in uniform; but as she did so one of the men reined directly in her path. The act was obviously intentional.

The girl looked quickly up into the man's face, and her own went white. He who stopped her way was Captain Ernst Maenck. She had not seen the man for two years, but she had good cause to remember him as the governor of the castle of Blentz and the man who had attempted to take advantage of her helplessness when she had been a prisoner in Prince Peter's fortress. Now she looked straight into the fellow's eyes.

"Let me pass, please," she said coldly.

"I am sorry," replied Maenck with an evil smile; "but the king's orders are that you accompany me to Blentz--the king is there."

For answer the girl drove her spur into her mount's side. The animal leaped forward, striking Maenck's horse on the shoulder and half turning him aside, but the man clutched at the girl's bridle-rein, and, seizing it, brought her to a stop.

"You may as well come voluntarily, for come you must," he said. "It will be easier for you."

"I shall not come voluntarily," she replied. "If you take me to Blentz you will have to take me by force, and if my king is not sufficiently a gentleman to demand an accounting of you, I am at least more fortunate in the possession of a father who will."

"Your father will scarce wish to question the acts of his king," said Maenck--"his king and the husband of his daughter."

"What do you mean?" she cried.

"That before you are many hours older, your highness, you will be queen of Lutha."

The Princess Emma turned toward her tardy escort that had just arrived upon the scene.

"This person has stopped me," she said, "and will not permit me to continue toward Lustadt. Make a way for me; you are armed!"

Maenck smiled. "Both of them are my men," he explained.

The girl saw it all now--the whole scheme to lure her to Blentz. Even then, though, she could not believe the king had been one of the conspirators of the plot.

Weak as he was he was still a Rubinroth, and it was difficult for a Von der Tann to believe in the duplicity of a member of the house they had served so loyally for centuries. With bowed head the princess turned her horse into the road that led toward Blentz. Half the troopers preceded her, the balance following behind.

Maenck wondered at the promptness of her surrender.

"To be a queen--ah! that was the great temptation," he thought but he did not know what was passing in the girl's mind. She had seen that escape for the moment was impossible, and so had decided to bide her time until a more propitious chance should come. In silence she rode among her captors. The thought of being brought to Blentz alive was unbearable.

Somewhere along the road there would be an opportunity to escape. Her horse was fleet; with a short start he could easily outdistance these heavier cavalry animals and as a last resort she could--she must--find some way to end her life, rather than to be dragged to the altar beside Leopold of Lutha.

Since childhood Emma von der Tann had ridden these hilly roads. She knew every lane and bypath for miles around. She knew the short cuts, the gullies and ravines. She knew where one might, with a good jumper, save a wide detour, and as she rode toward Blentz she passed in review through her mind each of the many spots where a sudden break for liberty might have the best chance to succeed.

And at last she hit upon the place where a quick turn would take her from the main road into the roughest sort of going for one not familiar with the trail. Maenck and his soldiers had already partially relaxed their vigilance. The officer had come to the conclusion that his prisoner was resigned to her fate and that, after all, the fate of being forced to be queen did not appear so dark to her.

They had wound up a wooded hill and were half way up to the summit. The princess was riding close to the right-hand side of the road. Quite suddenly, and before a hand could be raised to stay her, she wheeled her mount between two trees, struck home her spur, and was gone into the wood upon the steep hillside.

With an oath, Maenck cried to his men to be after her. He himself spurred into the forest at the point where the girl had disappeared. So sudden had been her break for liberty and so quickly had the foliage swallowed her that there was something almost uncanny in it.

A hundred yards from the road the trees were further apart, and through them the pursuers caught a glimpse of their quarry. The girl was riding like mad along the rough, uneven hillside. Her mount, surefooted as a chamois, seemed in his element. But two of the horses of her pursuers were as swift, and under the cruel spurs of their riders were closing up on their fugitive. The girl urged her horse to greater speed, yet still the two behind closed in.

A hundred yards ahead lay a deep and narrow gully, hid by bushes that grew rankly along its verge. Straight toward this the Princess Emma von der Tann rode. Behind her came her pursuers--two quite close and the others trailing farther in the rear. The girl reined in a trifle, letting the troopers that were closest to her gain until they were but a few strides behind, then she put spur to her horse and drove him at topmost speed straight toward the gully. At the bushes she spoke a low word in his backlaid ears, raised him quickly with the bit,

leaning forward as he rose in air. Like a bird that animal took the bushes and the gully beyond, while close behind him crashed the two luckless troopers.

Emma von der Tann cast a single backward glance over her shoulder, as her horse regained his stride upon the opposite side of the gully, to see her two foremost pursuers plunging headlong into it. Then she shook free her reins and gave her mount his head along a narrow trail that both had followed many times before.

Behind her, Maenck and the balance of his men came to a sudden stop at the edge of the gully. Below them one of the troopers was struggling to his feet. The other lay very still beneath his motionless horse. With an angry oath Maenck directed one of his men to remain and help the two who had plunged over the brink, then with the others he rode along the gully searching for a crossing.

Before they found one their captive was a mile ahead of them, and, barring accident, quite beyond recapture. She was making for a highway that would lead her to Lustadt. Ordinarily she had been wont to bear a little to the north-east at this point and strike back into the road that she had just left; but today she feared to do so lest she be cut off before she gained the north and south highroad which the other road crossed a little farther on.

To her right was a small farm across which she had never ridden, for she always had made it a point never to trespass upon fenced grounds. On the opposite side of the farm was a wood, and somewhere beyond that a small stream which the highroad crossed upon a little bridge. It was all new country to her, but it must be ventured.

She took the fence at the edge of the clearing and then reined in a moment to look behind her. A mile away she saw the head and shoulders of a horseman above some low bushes--the pursuers had found a way through the gully.

Turning once more to her flight the girl rode rapidly across the fields toward the wood. Here she found a high wire fence so close to thickly growing trees upon the opposite side that she dared not attempt to jump it--there was no point at which she would not have been raked from the saddle by overhanging boughs. Slipping to the ground she attacked the barrier with her bare hands, attempting to tear away the staples that held the wire in place. For several minutes she surged and tugged upon the unyielding metal strand. An occasional backward glance revealed to her horrified eyes the rapid approach of her enemies. One of them was far in advance of the others--in another moment he would be upon her.

With redoubled fury she turned again to the fence. A superhuman effort brought away a staple. One wire was down and an instant later two more. Standing with

one foot upon the wires to keep them from tangling about her horse's legs, she pulled her mount across into the wood. The foremost horseman was close upon her as she finally succeeded in urging the animal across the fallen wires.

The girl sprang to her horse's side just as the man reached the fence. The wires, released from her weight, sprang up breast high against his horse. He leaped from the saddle the instant that the girl was swinging into her own. Then the fellow jumped the fence and caught her bridle.

She struck at him with her whip, lashing him across the head and face, but he clung tightly, dragged hither and thither by the frightened horse, until at last he managed to reach the girl's arm and drag her to the ground.

Almost at the same instant a man, unkempt and disheveled, sprang from behind a tree and with a single blow stretched the trooper unconscious upon the ground.