

Chapter VII - BARNEY TO THE RESCUE

As Barney Custer raced along the Austrian highroad toward the frontier and Lutha, his spirits rose to a pitch of buoyancy to which they had been strangers for the past several days. For the first time in many hours it seemed possible to Barney to entertain reasonable hopes of escape from the extremely dangerous predicament into which he had gotten himself.

He was even humming a gay little tune as he drove into a tiny hamlet through which the road wound. No sign of military appeared to fill him with apprehension. He was very hungry and the odor of cooking fell gratefully upon his nostrils. He drew up before the single inn, and presently, washed and brushed, was sitting before the first meal he had seen for two days. In the enjoyment of the food he almost forgot the dangers he had passed through, or that other dangers might be lying in wait for him at his elbow.

From the landlord he learned that the frontier lay but three miles to the south of the hamlet. Three miles! Three miles to Lutha! What if there was a price upon his head in that kingdom? It was HER home. It had been his mother's birthplace. He loved it.

Further, he must enter there and reach the ear of old Prince von der Tann. Once more he must save the king who had shown such scant gratitude upon another occasion.

For Leopold, Barney Custer did not give the snap of his fingers; but what Leopold, the king, stood for in the lives and sentiments of the Luthanians--of the Von der Tanns--was very dear to the American because it was dear to a trim, young girl and to a rugged, leonine, old man, of both of whom Barney was inordinately fond. And possibly, too, it was dear to him because of the royal blood his mother had bequeathed him.

His meal disposed of to the last morsel, and paid for, Barney entered the stolen car and resumed his journey toward Lutha. That he could remain there he knew to be impossible, but in delivering his news to Prince Ludwig he might have an opportunity to see the Princess Emma once again--it would be worth risking his life for, of that he was perfectly satisfied. And then he could go across into Serbia with the new credentials that he had no doubt Prince von der Tann would furnish him for the asking to replace those the Austrians had confiscated.

At the frontier Barney was halted by an Austrian customs officer; but when the latter recognized the military car and the Austrian uniform of the driver he waved

him through without comment. Upon the other side the American expected possible difficulty with the Luthanian customs officer, but to his surprise he found the little building deserted, and none to bar his way. At last he was in Lutha--by noon on the following day he should be at Tann.

To reach the Old Forest by the best roads it was necessary to bear a little to the southeast, passing through Tafelberg and striking the north and south highway between that point and Lustadt, to which he could hold until reaching the east and west road that runs through both Tann and Blentz on its way across the kingdom.

The temptation to stop for a few minutes in Tafelberg for a visit with his old friend Herr Kramer was strong, but fear that he might be recognized by others, who would not guard his secret so well as the shopkeeper of Tafelberg would, decided him to keep on his way. So he flew through the familiar main street of the quaint old village at a speed that was little, if any less, than fifty miles an hour.

On he raced toward the south, his speed often necessarily diminished upon the winding mountain roads, but for the most part clinging to a reckless mileage that caused the few natives he encountered to flee to the safety of the bordering fields, there to stand in open-mouthed awe.

Halfway between Tafelberg and the crossroad into which he purposed turning to the west toward Tann there is an S-curve where the bases of two small hills meet. The road here is narrow and treacherous--fifteen miles an hour is almost a reckless speed at which to travel around the curves of the S. Beyond are open fields upon either side of the road.

Barney took the turns carefully and had just emerged into the last leg of the S when he saw, to his consternation, a half-dozen Austrian infantrymen lolling beside the road. An officer stood near them talking with a sergeant. To turn back in that narrow road was impossible. He could only go ahead and trust to his uniform and the military car to carry him safely through. Before he reached the group of soldiers the fields upon either hand came into view. They were dotted with tents, wagons, motor-vans and artillery. What did it mean? What was this Austrian army doing in Lutha?

Already the officer had seen him. This was doubtless an outpost, however clumsily placed it might be for strategic purposes. To pass it was Barney's only hope. He had passed through one Austrian army--why not another? He approached the outpost at a moderate rate of speed--to tear toward it at the rate his heart desired would be to awaken not suspicion only but positive conviction that his purposes and motives were ulterior.

The officer stepped toward the road as though to halt him. Barney pretended to be fussing with some refractory piece of controlling mechanism beneath the cowl--apparently he did not see the officer. He was just opposite him when the latter shouted to him. Barney straightened up quickly and saluted, but did not stop.

"Halt!" cried the officer.

Barney pointed down the road in the direction in which he was headed.

"Halt!" repeated the officer, running to the car.

Barney glanced ahead. Two hundred yards farther on was another post--beyond that he saw no soldiers. He turned and shouted a volley of intentionally unintelligible jargon at the officer, continuing to point ahead of him.

He hoped to confuse the man for the few seconds necessary for him to reach the last post. If the soldiers there saw that he had been permitted to pass through the first they doubtless would not hinder his further passage. That they were watching him Barney could see.

He had passed the officer now. There was no necessity for dalliance. He pressed the accelerator down a trifle. The car moved forward at increased speed. A final angry shout broke from the officer behind him, followed by a quick command. Barney did not have to wait long to learn the tenor of the order, for almost immediately a shot sounded from behind and a bullet whirred above his head. Another shot and another followed.

Barney was pressing the accelerator downward to the limit. The car responded nobly--there was no sputtering, no choking. Just a rapid rush of increasing momentum as the machine gained headway by leaps and bounds.

The bullets were ripping the air all about him. Just ahead the second outpost stood directly in the center of the road. There were three soldiers and they were taking deliberate aim, as carefully as though upon the rifle range. It seemed to Barney that they couldn't miss him. He swerved the car suddenly from one side of the road to the other. At the rate that it was going the move was fraught with but little less danger than the supine facing of the leveled guns ahead.

The three rifles spoke almost simultaneously. The glass of the windshield shattered in Barney's face. There was a hole in the left-hand front fender that had not been there before.

"Rotten shooting," commented Barney Custer, of Beatrice.

The soldiers still stood in the center of the road firing at the swaying car as, lurching from side to side, it bore down upon them. Barney sounded the raucous military horn; but the soldiers seemed unconscious of their danger--they still stood there pumping lead toward the onrushing Juggernaut. At the last instant they attempted to rush from its path; but they were too late.

At over sixty miles an hour the huge, gray monster bore down upon them. One of them fell beneath the wheels--the two others were thrown high in air as the bumper struck them. The body of the man who had fallen beneath the wheels threw the car half way across the road--only iron nerve and strong arms held it from the ditch upon the opposite side.

Barney Custer had never been nearer death than at that moment--not even when he faced the firing squad before the factory wall in Burgova. He had done that without a tremor--he had heard the bullets of the outpost whistling about his head a moment before, with a smile upon his lips--he had faced the leveled rifles of the three he had ridden down and he had not quailed. But now, his machine in the center of the road again, he shook like a leaf, still in the grip of the sickening nausea of that awful moment when the mighty, insensate monster beneath him had reeled drunkenly in its mad flight, swerving toward the ditch and destruction.

For a few minutes he held to his rapid pace before he looked around, and then it was to see two cars climbing into the road from the encampment in the field and heading toward him in pursuit. Barney grinned. Once more he was master of his nerves. They'd have a merry chase, he thought, and again he accelerated the speed of the car. Once before he had had it up to seventy-five miles, and for a moment, when he had had no opportunity to even glance at the speedometer, much higher. Now he was to find the maximum limit of the possibilities of the brave car he had come to look upon with real affection.

The road ahead was comparatively straight and level. Behind him came the enemy. Barney watched the road rushing rapidly out of sight beneath the gray fenders. He glanced occasionally at the speedometer. Seventy-five miles an hour. Seventy-seven! "Going some," murmured Barney as he saw the needle vibrate up to eighty. Gradually he nursed her up and up to greater speed.

Eighty-five! The trees were racing by him in an indistinct blur of green. The fences were thin, wavering lines--the road a white-gray ribbon, ironed by the terrific speed to smooth unwrinkledness. He could not take his eyes from the business of steering to glance behind; but presently there broke faintly through the whirl of the wind beating against his ears the faint report of a gun. He was being fired upon again. He pressed down still further upon the accelerator. The

car answered to the pressure. The needle rose steadily until it reached ninety miles an hour--and topped it.

Then from somewhere in the radiator hose a hissing and a spurt of steam. Barney was dumbfounded. He had filled the cooling system at the inn where he had eaten. It had been working perfectly before and since. What could have happened? There could be but a single explanation. A bullet from the gun of one of the three men who had attempted to stop him at the second outpost had penetrated the radiator, and had slowly drained it.

Barney knew that the end was near, since the usefulness of the car in furthering his escape was over. At the speed he was going it would be but a short time before the superheated pistons expanding in their cylinders would tear the motor to pieces. Barney felt that he would be lucky if he himself were not killed when it happened.

He reduced his speed and glanced behind. His pursuers had not gained upon him, but they still were coming. A bend in the road shut them from his view. A little way ahead the road crossed over a river upon a wooden bridge. On the opposite side and to the right of the road was a wood. It seemed to offer the most likely possibilities of concealment in the vicinity. If he could but throw his pursuers off the trail for a while he might succeed in escaping through the wood, eventually reaching Tann on foot. He had a rather hazy idea of the exact direction of the town and castle, but that he could find them eventually he was sure.

The sight of the river and the bridge he was nearing suggested a plan, and the ominous grating of the overheated motor warned him that whatever he was to do he must do at once. As he neared the bridge he reduced the speed of the car to fifteen miles an hour, and set the hand throttle to hold it there. Still gripping the steering wheel with one hand, he climbed over the left-hand door to the running board. As the front wheels of the car ran up onto the bridge Barney gave the steering wheel a sudden turn to the right, and jumped.

The car veered toward the wooden handrail, there was a splintering of stanchions, as, with a crash, the big machine plunged through them headforemost into the river. Without waiting to give even a glance at his handiwork Barney Custer ran across the bridge, leaped the fence upon the right-hand side and plunged into the shelter of the wood.

Then he turned to look back up the road in the direction from which his pursuers were coming. They were not in sight--they had not seen his ruse. The water in the river was of sufficient depth to completely cover the car--no sign of it appeared above the surface.

Barney turned into the wood smiling. His scheme had worked well. The occupants of the two cars following him might not note the broken handrail, or, if they did, might not connect it with Barney in any way. In this event they would continue in the direction of Lustadt, wondering what in the world had become of their quarry. Or, if they guessed that his car had gone over into the river, they would doubtless believe that its driver had gone with it. In either event Barney would be given ample time to find his way to Tann.

He wished that he might find other clothes, since if he were dressed otherwise there would be no reason to imagine that his pursuers would recognize him should they come upon him. None of them could possibly have gained a sufficiently good look at his features to recognize them again.

The Austrian uniform, however, would convict him, or at least lay him under suspicion, and in Barney's present case, suspicion was as good as conviction were he to fall into the hands of the Austrians. The garb had served its purpose well in aiding in his escape from Austria, but now it was more of a menace than an asset.

For a week Barney Custer wandered through the woods and mountains of Lutha. He did not dare approach or question any human being. Several times he had seen Austrian cavalry that seemed to be scouring the country for some purpose that the American could easily believe was closely connected with himself. At least he did not feel disposed to stop them, as they cantered past his hiding place, to inquire the nature of their business.

Such farmhouses as he came upon he gave a wide berth except at night, and then he only approached them stealthily for such provender as he might filch. Before the week was up he had become an expert chicken thief, being able to rob a roost as quietly as the most finished carpetbagger on the sunny side of Mason and Dixon's line.

A careless housewife, leaving her lord and master's rough shirt and trousers hanging upon the line overnight, had made possible for Barney the coveted change in raiment. Now he was barged as a Luthanian peasant. He was hatless, since the lady had failed to hang out her mate's woolen cap, and Barney had not dared retain a single vestige of the damning Austrian uniform.

What the peasant woman thought when she discovered the empty line the following morning Barney could only guess, but he was morally certain that her grief was more than tempered by the gold piece he had wrapped in a bit of cloth torn from the soldier's coat he had worn, which he pinned on the line where the shirt and pants had been.

It was somewhere near noon upon the seventh day that Barney skirting a little stream, followed through the concealing shade of a forest toward the west. In his peasant dress he now felt safer to approach a farmhouse and inquire his way to Tann, for he had come a sufficient distance from the spot where he had stolen his new clothes to hope that they would not be recognized or that the news of their theft had not preceded him.

As he walked he heard the sound of the feet of a horse galloping over a dry field--muffled, rapid thud approaching closer upon his right hand. Barney remained motionless. He was sure that the rider would not enter the wood which, with its low-hanging boughs and thick underbrush, was ill adapted to equestrianism.

Closer and closer came the sound until it ceased suddenly scarce a hundred yards from where the American hid. He waited in silence to discover what would happen next. Would the rider enter the wood on foot? What was his purpose? Was it another Austrian who had by some miracle discovered the whereabouts of the fugitive? Barney could scarce believe it possible.

Presently he heard another horse approaching at the same mad gallop. He heard the sound of rapid, almost frantic efforts of some nature where the first horse had come to a stop. He heard a voice urging the animal forward--pleading, threatening. A woman's voice. Barney's excitement became intense in sympathy with the subdued excitement of the woman whom he could not as yet see.

A moment later the second rider came to a stop at the same point at which the first had reined in. A man's voice rose roughly. "Halt!" it cried. "In the name of the king, halt!" The American could no longer resist the temptation to see what was going on so close to him "in the name of the king."

He advanced from behind his tree until he saw the two figures--a man's and a woman's. Some bushes intervened--he could not get a clear view of them, yet there was something about the figure of the woman, whose back was toward him as she struggled to mount her frightened horse, that caused him to leap rapidly toward her. He rounded a tree a few paces from her just as the man--a trooper in the uniform of the house of Blentz--caught her arm and dragged her from the saddle. At the same instant Barney recognized the girl--it was Princess Emma.

Before either the trooper or the princess were aware of his presence he had leaped to the man's side and dealt him a blow that stretched him at full length upon the ground--stunned.