

## Chapter VIII - AN ADVENTUROUS DAY

For an instant the two stood looking at one another. The girl's eyes were wide with incredulity, with hope, with fear. She was the first to break the silence.

"Who are you?" she breathed in a half whisper.

"I don't wonder that you ask," returned the man. "I must look like a scarecrow. I'm Barney Custer. Don't you remember me now? Who did you think I was?"

The girl took a step toward him. Her eyes lighted with relief.

"Captain Maenck told me that you were dead," she said, "that you had been shot as a spy in Austria, and then there is that uncanny resemblance to the king-- since he has shaved his beard it is infinitely more remarkable. I thought you might be he. He has been at Blentz and I knew that it was quite possible that he had discovered treachery upon the part of Prince Peter. In which case he might have escaped in disguise. I really wasn't sure that you were not he until you spoke."

Barney stooped and removed the bandoleer of cartridges from the fallen trooper, as well as his revolver and carbine. Then he took the girl's hand and together they turned into the wood. Behind them came the sound of pursuit. They heard the loud words of Maenck as he ordered his three remaining men into the wood on foot. As he advanced, Barney looked to the magazine of his carbine and the cylinder of his revolver.

"Why were they pursuing you?" he asked.

"They were taking me to Blentz to force me to wed Leopold," she replied. "They told me that my father's life depended upon my consenting; but I should not have done so. The honor of my house is more precious than the life of any of its members. I escaped them a few miles back, and they were following to overtake me."

A noise behind them caused Barney to turn. One of the troopers had come into view. He carried his carbine in his hands and at sight of the man with the fugitive girl he raised it to his shoulder; but as the American turned toward him his eyes went wide and his jaw dropped.

Instantly Barney knew that the fellow had noted his resemblance to the king. Barney's body was concealed from the view of the other by a bush which grew between them, so the man saw only the face of the American. The fellow turned and shouted to Maenck: "The king is with her."

"Nonsense," came the reply from farther back in the wood. "If there is a man with her and he will not surrender, shoot him." At the words Barney and the girl turned once more to their flight. From behind came the command to halt--"Halt! or I fire." Just ahead Barney saw the river.

They were sure to be taken there if he was unable to gain the time necessary to make good a crossing. Upon the opposite side was a continuation of the wood. Behind them the leading trooper was crashing through the underbrush in renewed pursuit. He came in sight of them again, just as they reached the river bank. Once more his carbine was leveled. Barney pushed the girl to her knees behind a bush. Then he wheeled and fired, so quickly that the man with the already leveled gun had no time to anticipate his act.

With a cry the fellow threw his hands above his head, staggered forward and plunged full length upon his face. Barney gathered the princess in his arms and plunged into the shallow stream. The girl held his carbine as he stumbled over the rocky bottom. The water deepened rapidly--the opposite shore seemed a long way off and behind there were three more enemies in hot pursuit.

Under ordinary circumstances Barney could have found it in his heart to wish the little Luthanian river as broad as the Mississippi, for only under such circumstances as these could he ever hope to hold the Princess Emma in his arms. Two years before she had told him that she loved him; but at the same time she had given him to understand that their love was hopeless. She might refuse to wed the king; but that she should ever wed another while the king lived was impossible, unless Leopold saw fit to release her from her betrothal to him and sanction her marriage to another. That he ever would do this was to those who knew him not even remotely possible.

He loved Emma von der Tann and he hated Barney Custer--hated him with a jealous hatred that was almost fanatic in its intensity. And even that the Princess Emma von der Tann would wed him were she free to wed was a question that was not at all clear in the mind of Barney Custer. He knew something of the traditions of this noble family--of the pride of caste, of the fetish of blood that inexorably dictated the ordering of their lives.

The girl had just said that the honor of her house was more precious than the life of any of its members. How much more precious would it be to her than her own material happiness! Barney Custer sighed and struggled through the swirling waters that were now above his hips. If he pressed the lithe form closer to him than necessity demanded, who may blame him?

The girl, whose face was toward the bank they had just quitted, gave no evidence of displeasure if she noted the fierce pressure of his muscles. Her eyes were riveted upon the wood behind. Presently a man emerged. He called to them in a loud and threatening tone.

Barney redoubled his Herculean efforts to gain the opposite bank. He was in midstream now and the water had risen to his waist. The girl saw Maenck and the other trooper emerge from the underbrush beside the first. Maenck was crazed with anger. He shook his fist and screamed aloud his threatening commands to halt, and then, of a sudden, gave an order to one of the men at his side. Immediately the fellow raised his carbine and fired at the escaping couple.

The bullet struck the water behind them. At the sound of the report the girl raised the gun she held and leveled it at the group behind her. She pulled the trigger. There was a sharp report, and one of the troopers fell. Then she fired again, quickly, and again and again. She did not score another hit, but she had the satisfaction of seeing Maenck and the last of his troopers dodge back to the safety of protecting trees.

"The cowards!" muttered Barney as the enemy's shot announced his sinister intention; "they might have hit your highness."

The girl did not reply until she had ceased firing.

"Captain Maenck is notoriously a coward," she said. "He is hiding behind a tree now with one of his men--I hit the other."

"You hit one of them!" exclaimed Barney enthusiastically.

"Yes," said the girl. "I have shot a man. I often wondered what the sensation must be to have done such a thing. I should feel terribly, but I don't. They were firing at you, trying to shoot you in the back while you were defenseless. I am not sorry--I cannot be; but I only wish that it had been Captain Maenck."

In a short time Barney reached the bank and, helping the girl up, climbed to her side. A couple of shots followed them as they left the river, but did not fall dangerously near. Barney took the carbine and replied, then both of them disappeared into the wood.

For the balance of the day they tramped on in the direction of Lustadt, making but little progress owing to the fear of apprehension. They did not dare utilize the high road, for they were still too close to Blentz. Their only hope lay in reaching the protection of Prince von der Tann before they should be recaptured by the king's emissaries. At dusk they came to the outskirts of a town. Here they hid

until darkness settled, for Barney had determined to enter the place after dark and hire horses.

The American marveled at the bravery and endurance of the girl. He had always supposed that a princess was so carefully guarded from fatigue and privation all her life that the least exertion would prove her undoing; but no hardy peasant girl could have endured more bravely the hardships and dangers through which the Princess Emma had passed since the sun rose that morning.

At last darkness came, and with it they approached and entered the village. They kept to unlighted side streets until they met a villager, of whom they inquired their way to some private house where they might obtain refreshments. The fellow scrutinized them with evident suspicion.

"There is an inn yonder," he said, pointing toward the main street. "You can obtain food there. Why should respectable folk want to go elsewhere than to the public inn? And if you are afraid to go there you must have very good reasons for not wanting to be seen, and--" he stopped short as though assailed by an idea. "Wait," he cried, excitedly, "I will go and see if I can find a place for you. Wait right here," and off he ran toward the inn.

"I don't like the looks of that," said Barney, after the man had left them. "He's gone to report us to someone. Come, we'd better get out of here before he comes back."

The two turned up a side street away from the inn. They had gone but a short distance when they heard the sound of voices and the thud of horses' feet behind them. The horses were coming at a walk and with them were several men on foot. Barney took the princess' hand and drew her up a hedge bordered driveway that led into private grounds. In the shadows of the hedge they waited for the party behind them to pass. It might be no one searching for them, but it was just as well to be on the safe side--they were still near Blentz. Before the men reached their hiding place a motor car followed and caught up with them, and as the party came opposite the driveway Barney and the princess overheard a portion of their conversation.

"Some of you go back and search the street behind the inn--they may not have come this way." The speaker was in the motor car. "We will follow along this road for a bit and then turn into the Lustadt highway. If you don't find them go back along the road toward Tann."

In her excitement the Princess Emma had not noticed that Barney Custer still held her hand in his. Now he pressed it. "It is Maenck's voice," he whispered. "Every road will be guarded."

For a moment he was silent, thinking. The searching party had passed on. They could still hear the purring of the motor as Maenck's car moved slowly up the street.

"This is a driveway," murmured Barney. "People who build driveways into their grounds usually have something to drive. Whatever it is it should be at the other end of the driveway. Let's see if it will carry two."

Still in the shadow of the hedge they moved cautiously toward the upper end of the private road until presently they saw a building looming in their path.

"A garage?" whispered Barney.

"Or a barn," suggested the princess.

"In either event it should contain something that can go," returned the American. "Let us hope that it can go like--like--ah--the wind."

"And carry two," supplemented the princess.

"Wait here," said Barney. "If I get caught, run. Whatever happens you mustn't be caught."

Princess Emma dropped back close to the hedge and Barney approached the building, which proved to be a private garage. The doors were locked, as also were the three windows. Barney passed entirely around the structure halting at last upon the darkest side. Here was a window. Barney tried to loosen the catch with the blade of his pocket knife, but it wouldn't unfasten. His endeavors resulted only in snapping short the blade of his knife. For a moment he stood contemplating the baffling window. He dared not break the glass for fear of arousing the inmates of the house which, though he could not see it, might be close at hand.

Presently he recalled a scene he had witnessed on State Street in Chicago several years before--a crowd standing before the window of a jeweler's shop inspecting a neat little hole that a thief had cut in the glass with a diamond and through which he had inserted his hand and brought forth several hundred dollars worth of loot. But Barney Custer wore no diamond--he would as soon have worn a celluloid collar. But women wore diamonds. Doubtless the Princess Emma had one. He ran quickly to her side.

"Have you a diamond ring?" he whispered.

"Gracious!" she exclaimed, "you are progressing rapidly," and slipped a solitaire from her finger to his hand.

"Thanks," said Barney. "I need the practice; but wait and you'll see that a diamond may be infinitely more valuable than even the broker claims," and he was gone again into the shadows of the garage. Here upon the window pane he scratched a rough deep circle, close to the catch. A quick blow sent the glass clattering to the floor within. For a minute Barney stood listening for any sign that the noise had attracted attention, but hearing nothing he ran his hand through the hole that he had made and unlatched the frame. A moment later he had crawled within.

Before him, in the darkness, stood a roadster. He ran his hand over the pedals and levers, breathing a sigh of relief as his touch revealed the familiar control of a standard make. Then he went to the double doors. They opened easily and silently.

Once outside he hastened to the side of the waiting girl.

"It's a machine," he whispered. "We must both be in it when it leaves the garage--it's the through express for Lustadt and makes no stops for passengers or freight."

He led her back to the garage and helped her into the seat beside him. As silently as possible he ran the machine into the driveway. A hundred yards to the left, half hidden by intervening trees and shrubbery, rose the dark bulk of a house. A subdued light shone through the drawn blinds of several windows--the only sign of life about the premises until the car had cleared the garage and was moving slowly down the driveway. Then a door opened in the house letting out a flood of light in which the figure of a man was silhouetted. A voice broke the silence.

"Who are you? What are you doing there? Come back!"

The man in the doorway called excitedly, "Friedrich! Come! Come quickly! Someone is stealing the automobile," and the speaker came running toward the driveway at top speed. Behind him came Friedrich. Both were shouting, waving their arms and threatening. Their combined din might have aroused the dead.

Barney sought speed--silence now was useless. He turned to the left into the street away from the center of the town. In this direction had gone the automobile with Maenck, but by taking the first righthand turn Barney hoped to elude the captain. In a moment Friedrich and the other were hopelessly distanced. It was with a sigh of relief that the American turned the car into the dark shadows beneath the overarching trees of the first cross street.

He was running without lights along an unknown way; and beside him was the most precious burden that Barney Custer might ever expect to carry. Under these

circumstances his speed was greatly reduced from what he would have wished, but at that he was forced to accept grave risks. The road might end abruptly at the brink of a ravine--it might swerve perilously close to a stone quarry--or plunge headlong into a pond or river. Barney shuddered at the possibilities; but nothing of the sort happened. The street ran straight out of the town into a country road, rather heavy with sand. In the open the possibilities of speed were increased, for the night, though moonless, was clear, and the road visible for some distance ahead.

The fugitives were congratulating themselves upon the excellent chance they now had to reach Lustadt. There was only Maenck and his companion ahead of them in the other car, and as there were several roads by which one might reach the main highway the chances were fair that Prince Peter's aide would miss them completely.

Already escape seemed assured when the pounding of horses' hoofs upon the roadway behind them arose to blast their new found hope. Barney increased the speed of the car. It leaped ahead in response to his foot; but the road was heavy, and the sides of the ruts gripping the tires retarded the speed. For a mile they held the lead of the galloping horsemen. The shouts of their pursuers fell clearly upon their ears, and the Princess Emma, turning in her seat, could easily see the four who followed. At last the car began to draw away--the distance between it and the riders grew gradually greater.

"I believe we are going to make it," whispered the girl, her voice tense with excitement. "If you could only go a little faster, Mr. Custer, I'm sure that we will."

"She's reached her limit in this sand," replied the man, "and there's a grade just ahead--we may find better going beyond, but they're bound to gain on us before we reach the top."

The girl strained her eyes into the night before them. On the right of the road stood an ancient ruin--grim and forbidding. As her eyes rested upon it she gave a little exclamation of relief.

"I know where we are now," she cried. "The hill ahead is sandy, and there is a quarter of a mile of sand beyond, but then we strike the Lustadt highway, and if we can reach it ahead of them their horses will have to go ninety miles an hour to catch us--provided this car possesses any such speed possibilities."

"If it can go forty we are safe enough," replied Barney; "but we'll give it a chance to go as fast as it can--the farther we are from the vicinity of Blentz the safer I shall feel for the welfare of your highness."

A shot rang behind them, and a bullet whistled high above their heads. The princess seized the carbine that rested on the seat between them.

"Shall I?" she asked, turning its muzzle back over the lowered top.

"Better not," answered the man. "They are only trying to frighten us into surrendering--that shot was much too high to have been aimed at us--they are shooting over our heads purposely. If they deliberately attempt to pot us later, then go for them, but to do it now would only draw their fire upon us. I doubt if they wish to harm your highness, but they certainly would fire to hit in self-defense."

The girl lowered the firearm. "I am becoming perfectly bloodthirsty," she said, "but it makes me furious to be hunted like a wild animal in my native land, and by the command of my king, at that. And to think that you who placed him upon his throne, you who have risked your life many times for him, will find no protection at his hands should you be captured is maddening. Ach, Gott, if I were a man!"

"I thank God that you are not, your highness," returned Barney fervently.

Gently she laid her hand upon his where it gripped the steering wheel.

"No," she said, "I was wrong--I do not need to be a man while there still be such men as you, my friend; but I would that I were not the unhappy woman whom Fate had bound to an ingrate king--to a miserable coward!"

They had reached the grade at last, and the motor was straining to the Herculean task imposed upon it.

Grinding and grating in second speed the car toiled upward through the clinging sand. The pace was snail-like. Behind, the horsemen were gaining rapidly. The labored breathing of their mounts was audible even above the noise of the motor, so close were they. The top of the ascent lay but a few yards ahead, and the pursuers were but a few yards behind.

"Halt!" came from behind, and then a shot. The ping of the bullet and the scream of the ricochet warned the man and the girl that those behind them were becoming desperate--the bullet had struck one of the rear fenders. Without again asking assent the princess turned and, kneeling upon the cushion of the seat, fired at the nearest horseman. The horse stumbled and plunged to his knees. Another, just behind, ran upon him, and the two rolled over together with their riders. Two more shots were fired by the remaining horsemen and answered by the girl in the automobile, and then the car topped the hill, shot into high, and



with renewed speed forged into the last quarter-mile of heavy going toward the good road ahead; but now the grade was slightly downward and all the advantage was upon the side of the fugitives.

However, their margin would be but scant when they reached the highway, for behind them the remaining troopers were spurring their jaded horses to a final spurt of speed. At last the white ribbon of the main road became visible. To the right they saw the headlights of a machine. It was Maenck probably, doubtless attracted their way by the shooting.

But the machine was a mile away and could not possibly reach the intersection of the two roads before they had turned to the left toward Lustadt. Then the incident would resolve itself into a simple test of speed between the two cars--and the ability and nerve of the drivers. Barney hadn't the slightest doubt now as to the outcome. His borrowed car was a good one, in good condition. And in the matter of driving he rather prided himself that he needn't take his hat off to anyone when it came to ability and nerve.

They were only about fifty feet from the highway. The girl touched his hand again. "We're safe," she cried, her voice vibrant with excitement, "we're safe at last." From beneath the bonnet, as though in answer to her statement, came a sickly, sucking sputter. The momentum of the car diminished. The throbbing of the engine ceased. They sat in silence as the machine coasted toward the highway and came to a dead stop, with its front wheels upon the road to safety. The girl turned toward Barney with an exclamation of surprise and interrogation.

"The jig's up," he groaned; "we're out of gasoline!"