

## Chapter IX - THE CAPTURE

The capture of Princess Emma von der Tann and Barney Custer was a relatively simple matter. Open fields spread in all directions about the crossroads at which their car had come to its humiliating stop. There was no cover. To have sought escape by flight, thus in the open, would have been to expose the princess to the fire of the troopers. Barney could not do this. He preferred to surrender and trust to chance to open the way to escape later.

When Captain Ernst Maenck drove up he found the prisoners disarmed, standing beside the now-useless car. He alighted from his own machine and with a low bow saluted the princess, an ironical smile upon his thin lips. Then he turned his attention toward her companion.

"Who are you?" he demanded gruffly. In the darkness he failed to recognize the American whom he thought dead in Austria.

"A servant of the house of Von der Tann," replied Barney.

"You deserve shooting," growled the officer, "but we'll leave that to Prince Peter and the king. When I tell them the trouble you have caused us--well, God help you."

The journey to Blentz was a short one. They had been much nearer that grim fortress than either had guessed. At the outskirts of the town they were challenged by Austrian sentries, through which Maenck passed with ease after the sentinel had summoned an officer. From this man Maenck received the password that would carry them through the line of outposts between the town and the castle--"Slankamen." Barney, who overheard the word, made a mental note of it.

At last they reached the dreary castle of Peter of Blentz. In the courtyard Austrian soldiers mingled with the men of the bodyguard of the king of Lutha. Within, the king's officers fraternized with the officers of the emperor. Maenck led his prisoners to the great hall which was filled with officers and officials of both Austria and Lutha.

The king was not there. Maenck learned that he had retired to his apartments a few minutes earlier in company with Prince Peter of Blentz and Von Coblich. He sent a servant to announce his return with the Princess von der Tann and a man who had attempted to prevent her being brought to Blentz.

Barney had, as far as possible, kept his face averted from Maenck since they had entered the lighted castle. He hoped to escape recognition, for he knew that if his identity were guessed it might go hard with the princess. As for himself, it might go even harder, but of that he gave scarcely a thought--the safety of the princess was paramount.

After a few minutes of waiting the servant returned with the king's command to fetch the prisoners to his apartments. The face of the Princess Emma was haggard. For the first time Barney saw signs of fear upon her countenance. With leaden steps they accompanied their guard up the winding stairway to the tower rooms that had been furnished for the king. They were the same in which Emma von der Tann had been imprisoned two years before.

On either side of the doorway stood a soldier of the king's bodyguard. As Captain Maenck approached they saluted. A servant opened the door and they passed into the room. Before them were Peter of Blentz and Von Coblich standing beside a table at which Leopold of Lutha was sitting. The eyes of the three men were upon the doorway as the little party entered. The king's face was flushed with wine. He rose as his eyes rested upon the face of the princess.

"Greetings, your highness," he cried with an attempt at cordiality.

The girl looked straight into his eyes, coldly, and then bent her knee in formal curtsy. The king was about to speak again when his eyes wandered to the face of the American. Instantly his own went white and then scarlet. The eyes of Peter of Blentz followed those of the king, widening in astonishment as they rested upon the features of Barney Custer.

"You told me he was dead," shouted the king. "What is the meaning of this, Captain Maenck?"

Maenck looked at his male prisoner and staggered back as though struck between the eyes.

"Mein Gott," he exclaimed, "the impostor!"

"You told me he was dead," repeated the king accusingly.

"As God is my judge, your majesty," cried Peter of Blentz, "this man was shot by an Austrian firing squad in Burgova over a week ago."

"Sire," exclaimed Maenck, "this is the first sight I have had of the prisoners except in the darkness of the night; until this instant I had not the remotest suspicion of his identity. He told me that he was a servant of the house of Von der Tann."

"I told you the truth, then," interjected Barney.

"Silence, you ingrate!" cried the king.

"Ingrate?" repeated Barney. "You have the effrontery to call me an ingrate? You miserable puppy."

A silence, menacing in its intensity, fell upon the little assemblage. The king trembled. His rage choked him. The others looked as though they scarce could believe the testimony of their own ears. All there, with the possible exception of the king, knew that he deserved even more degrading appellations; but they were Europeans, and to Europeans a king is a king--that they can never forget. It had been the inherent suggestion of kingship that had bent the knee of the Princess Emma before the man she despised.

But to the American a king was only what he made himself. In this instance he was not even a man in the estimation of Barney Custer. Maenck took a step toward the prisoner--a menacing step, for his hand had gone to his sword. Barney met him with a level look from between narrowed lids. Maenck hesitated, for he was a great coward. Peter of Blentz spoke:

"Sire," he said, "the fellow knows that he is already as good as dead, and so in his bravado he dares affront you. He has been convicted of spying by the Austrians. He is still a spy. It is unnecessary to repeat the formality of a trial."

Leopold at last found his voice, though it trembled and broke as he spoke.

"Carry out the sentence of the Austrian court in the morning," he said. "A volley now might arouse the garrison in the town and be misconstrued."

Maenck ordered Barney escorted from the apartment, then he turned toward the king.

"And the other prisoner, sire?" he inquired.

"There is no other prisoner," he said. "Her highness, the Princess von der Tann, is a guest of Prince Peter. She will be escorted to her apartment at once."

"Her highness, the Princess von der Tann, is not a guest of Prince Peter." The girl's voice was low and cold. "If Mr. Custer is a prisoner, her highness, too, is a prisoner. If he is to be shot, she demands a like fate. To die by the side of a MAN would be infinitely preferable to living by the side of your majesty."

Once again Leopold of Lutha reddened. For a moment he paced the room angrily to hide his emotion. Then he turned once to Maenck.

"Escort the prisoner to the north tower," he commanded, "and this insolent girl to the chambers next to ours. Tomorrow we shall talk with her again."

Outside the room Barney turned for a last look at the princess as he was being led in one direction and she in another. A smile of encouragement was on his lips and cold hopelessness in his heart. She answered the smile and her lips formed a silent "good-bye." They formed something else, too--three words which he was sure he could not have mistaken, and then they parted, he for the death chamber and she for what fate she could but guess.

As his guard halted before a door at the far end of a long corridor Barney Custer sensed a sudden familiarity in his surroundings. He was conscious of that sensation which is common to all of us--of having lived through a scene at some former time, to each minutest detail.

As the door opened and he was pushed into the room he realized that there was excellent foundation for the impression--he immediately recognized the apartment as the same in which he had once before been imprisoned. At that time he had been mistaken for the mad king who had escaped from the clutches of Peter of Blentz. The same king was now visiting as a guest the fortress in which he had spent ten bitter years as a prisoner.

"Say your prayers, my friend," admonished Maenck, as he was about to leave him alone, "for at dawn you die--and this time the firing squad will make a better job of it."

Barney did not answer him, and the captain departed, locking the door after him and leaving two men on guard in the corridor. Alone, Barney looked about the room. It was in no wise changed since his former visit to it. He recalled the incidents of the hour of his imprisonment here, thought of old Joseph who had aided his escape, looked at the paneled fireplace, whose secret, it was evident, not even the master of Blentz was familiar with--and grinned.

"For at dawn you die!" he repeated to himself, still smiling broadly. Then he crossed quickly to the fireplace, running his fingers along the edge of one of the large tiled panels that hid the entrance to the well-like shaft that rose from the cellars beneath to the towers above and which opened through similar concealed exits upon each floor. If the floor above should be untenanted he might be able to reach it as he and Joseph had done two years ago when they opened the secret panel in the fireplace and climbed a hidden ladder to the room overhead; and then by vacant corridors reached the far end of the castle above the suite in which the princess had been confined and near which Barney had every reason to believe she was now imprisoned.

Carefully Barney's fingers traversed the edges of the panel. No hidden latch rewarded his search. Again and again he examined the perfectly fitted joints until he was convinced either that there was no latch there or that it was hid beyond possibility of discovery. With each succeeding minute the American's heart and hopes sank lower and lower. Two years had elapsed since he had seen the secret portal swing to the touch of Joseph's fingers. One may forget much in two years; but that he was at work upon the right panel Barney was positive. However, it would do no harm to examine its mate which resembled it in minutest detail.

Almost indifferently Barney turned his attention to the other panel. He ran his fingers over it, his eyes following them. What was that? A finger-print? Upon the left side half way up a tiny smudge was visible. Barney examined it more carefully. A round, white figure of the conventional design that was burned into the tile bore the telltale smudge.

Otherwise it differed apparently in no way from the numerous other round, white figures that were repeated many times in the scheme of decoration. Barney placed his thumb exactly over the mark that another thumb had left there and pushed. The figure sank into the panel beneath the pressure. Barney pushed harder, breathless with suspense. The panel swung in at his effort. The American could have whooped with delight.

A moment more and he stood upon the opposite side of the secret door in utter darkness, for he had quickly closed it after him. To strike a match was but the matter of a moment. The wavering light revealed the top of the ladder that led downward and the foot of another leading aloft. He struck still more matches in search of the rope. It was not there, but his quest revealed the fact that the well at this point was much larger than he had imagined--it broadened into a small chamber.

The light of many matches finally led him to the discovery of a passageway directly behind the fireplace. It was narrow, and after spanning the chimney descended by a few rough steps to a slightly lower level. It led toward the opposite end of the castle. Could it be possible that it connected directly with the apartments in the farther tower--in the tower where the king was and the Princess Emma? Barney could scarce hope for any such good luck, but at least it was worth investigating--it must lead somewhere.

He followed it warily, feeling his way with hands and feet and occasionally striking a match. It was evident that the corridor lay in the thick wall of the castle, midway between the bottoms of the windows of the second floor and the tops of those upon the first--this would account for the slightly lower level of the passage from the floor of the second story.

Barney had traversed some distance in the darkness along the forgotten corridor when the sound of voices came to him from beyond the wall at his right. He stopped, motionless, pressing his ear against the side wall. As he did so he became aware of the fact that at this point the wall was of wood--a large panel of hardwood. Now he could hear even the words of the speaker upon the opposite side.

"Fetch her here, captain, and I will talk with her alone." The voice was the king's. "And, captain, you might remove the guard from before the door temporarily. I shall not require them, nor do I wish them to overhear my conversation with the princess."

Barney could hear the officer acknowledge the commands of the king, and then he heard a door close. The man had gone to fetch the princess. The American struck a match and examined the panel before him. It reached to the top of the passageway and was some three feet in width.

At one side were three hinges, and at the other an ancient spring lock. For an instant Barney stood in indecision. What should he do? His entry into the apartments of the king would result in alarming the entire fortress. Were he sure the king was alone it might be accomplished. Should he enter now or wait until the Princess Emma had been brought to the king?

With the question came the answer--a bold and daring scheme. His fingers sought the lock. Very gently, he unlatched it and pushed outward upon the panel. Suddenly the great doorway gave beneath his touch. It opened a crack letting a flood of light into his dark cell that almost blinded him.

For a moment he could see nothing, and then out of the glaring blur grew the figure of a man sitting at a table--with his back toward the panel.

It was the king, and he was alone. Noiselessly Barney Custer entered the apartment, closing the panel after him. At his back now was the great oil painting of the Blentz princess that had hid the secret entrance to the room. He crossed the thick rugs until he stood behind the king. Then he clapped one hand over the mouth of the monarch of Lutha and threw the other arm about his neck.

"Make the slightest outcry and I shall kill you," he whispered in the ear of the terrified man.

Across the room Barney saw a revolver lying upon a small table. He raised the king to his feet and, turning his back toward the weapon dragged him across the apartment until the table was within easy reach. Then he snatched up the

revolver and swung the king around into a chair facing him, the muzzle of the gun pressed against his face.

"Silence," he whispered.

The king, white and trembling, gasped as his eyes fell upon the face of the American.

"You?" His voice was barely audible.

"Take off your clothes--every stitch of them--and if any one asks for admittance, deny them. Quick, now," as the king hesitated. "My life is forfeited unless I can escape. If I am apprehended I shall see that you pay for my recapture with your life--if any one enters this room without my sanction they will enter it to find a dead king upon the floor; do you understand?"

The king made no reply other than to commence divesting himself of his clothing. Barney followed his example, but not before he had crossed to the door that opened into the main corridor and shot the bolt upon the inside. When both men had removed their clothing Barney pointed to the little pile of soiled peasant garb that he had worn.

"Put those on," he commanded.

The king hesitated, drawing back in disgust. Barney paused, half-way into the royal union suit, and leveled the revolver at Leopold. The king picked up one of the garments gingerly between the tips of his thumb and finger.

"Hurry!" admonished the American, drawing the silk half-hose of the ruler of Lutha over his foot. "If you don't hurry," he added, "someone may interrupt us, and you know what the result would be--to you."

Scowling, Leopold donned the rough garments. Barney, fully clothed in the uniform the king had been wearing, stepped across the apartment to where the king's sword and helmet lay upon the side table that had also borne the revolver. He placed the helmet upon his head and buckled the sword-belt about his waist, then he faced the king, behind whom was a cheval glass. In it Barney saw his image. The king was looking at the American, his eyes wide and his jaw dropped. Barney did not wonder at his consternation. He himself was dumbfounded by the likeness which he bore to the king. It was positively uncanny. He approached Leopold.

"Remove your rings," he said, holding out his hand. The king did as he was bid, and Barney slipped the two baubles upon his fingers. One of them was the royal ring of the kings of Lutha.

The American now blindfolded the king and led him toward the panel which had given him ingress to the room. Through it the two men passed, Barney closing the panel after them. Then he conducted the king back along the dark passageway to the room which the American had but recently quitted. At the back of the panel which led into his former prison Barney halted and listened. No sound came from beyond the partition. Gently Barney opened the secret door a trifle--just enough to permit him a quick survey of the interior of the apartment. It was empty. A smile crossed his face as he thought of the difficulty Leopold might encounter the following morning in convincing his jailers that he was not the American.

Then he recalled his reflection in the cheval glass and frowned. Could Leopold convince them? He doubted it--and what then? The American was sentenced to be shot at dawn. They would shoot the king instead. Then there would be none to whom to return the kingship. What would he do with it? The temptation was great. Again a throne lay within his grasp--a throne and the woman he loved. None might ever know unless he chose to tell--his resemblance to Leopold was too perfect. It defied detection.

With an exclamation of impatience he wheeled about and dragged the frightened monarch back to the room from which he had stolen him. As he entered he heard a knock at the door.

"Do not disturb me now," he called. "Come again in half an hour."

"But it is Her Highness, Princess Emma, sire," came a voice from beyond the door. "You summoned her."

"She may return to her apartments," replied Barney.

All the time he kept his revolver leveled at the king, from his eyes he had removed the blind after they had entered the apartment. He crossed to the table where the king had been sitting when he surprised him, motioning the ragged ruler to follow and be seated.

"Take that pen," he said, "and write a full pardon for Mr. Bernard Custer, and an order requiring that he be furnished with money and set at liberty at dawn."

The king did as he was bid. For a moment the American stood looking at him before he spoke again.

"You do not deserve what I am going to do for you," he said. "And Lutha deserves a better king than the one my act will give her; but I am neither a thief nor a murderer, and so I must forbear leaving you to your just deserts and return your



throne to you. I shall do so after I have insured my own safety and done what I can for Lutha--what you are too little a man and king to do yourself.

"So soon as they liberate you in the morning, make the best of your way to Brosnov, on the Serbian frontier. Await me there. When I can, I shall come. Again we may exchange clothing and you can return to Lustadt. I shall cross over into Siberia out of your reach, for I know you too well to believe that any sense of honor or gratitude would prevent you signing my death-warrant at the first opportunity. Now, come!"

Once again Barney led the blindfolded king through the dark corridor to the room in the opposite tower--to the prison of the American. At the open panel he shoved him into the apartment. Then he drew the door quietly to, leaving the king upon the inside, and retraced his steps to the royal apartments. Crossing to the center table, he touched an electric button. A moment later an officer knocked at the door, which, in the meantime, Barney had unbolted.

"Enter!" said the American. He stood with his back toward the door until he heard it close behind the officer. When he turned he was apparently examining his revolver. If the officer suspected his identity, it was just as well to be prepared. Slowly he raised his eyes to the newcomer, who stood stiffly at salute. The officer looked him full in the face.

"I answered your majesty's summons," said the man.

"Oh, yes!" returned the American. "You may fetch the Princess Emma."

The officer saluted once more and backed out of the apartment. Barney walked to the table and sat down. A tin box of cigarettes lay beside the lamp. Barney lighted one of them. The king had good taste in the selection of tobacco, he thought. Well, a man must need have some redeeming characteristics.

Outside, in the corridor, he heard voices, and again the knock at the door. He bade them enter. As the door opened Emma von der Tann, her head thrown back and a flush of anger on her face, entered the room. Behind her was the officer who had been despatched to bring her. Barney nodded to the latter.

"You may go," he said. He drew a chair from the table and asked the princess to be seated. She ignored his request.

"What do you wish of me?" she asked. She was looking straight into his eyes. The officer had withdrawn and closed the door after him. They were alone, with nothing to fear; yet she did not recognize him.

"You are the king," she continued in cold, level tones, "but if you are also a gentleman, you will at once order me returned to my father at Lustadt, and with me the man to whom you owe so much. I do not expect it of you, but I wish to give you the chance.

"I shall not go without him. I am betrothed to you; but until tonight I should rather have died than wed you. Now I am ready to compromise. If you will set Mr. Custer at liberty in Serbia and return me unharmed to my father, I will fulfill my part of our betrothal."

Barney Custer looked straight into the girl's face for a long moment. A half smile played upon his lips at the thought of her surprise when she learned the truth, when suddenly it dawned upon him that she and he were both much safer if no one, not even her loyal self, guessed that he was other than the king. It is not difficult to live a part, but often it is difficult to act one. Some little word or look, were she to know that he was Barney Custer, might betray them; no, it was better to leave her in ignorance, though his conscience pricked him for the disloyalty that his act implied.

It seemed a poor return for her courage and loyalty to him that her statement to the man she thought king had revealed. He marveled that a Von der Tann could have spoken those words--a Von der Tann who but the day before had refused to save her father's life at the loss of the family honor. It seemed incredible to the American that he had won such love from such a woman. Again came the mighty temptation to keep the crown and the girl both; but with a straightening of his broad shoulders he threw it from him.

She was promised to the king, and while he masqueraded in the king's clothes, he at least would act the part that a king should. He drew a folded paper from his inside pocket and handed it to the girl.

"Here is the American's pardon," he said, "drawn up and signed by the king's own hand."

She opened it and, glancing through it hurriedly, looked up at the man before her with a questioning expression in her eyes.

"You came, then," she said, "to a realization of the enormity of your ingratitude?"

The man shrugged.

"He will never die at my command," he said.

"I thank your majesty," she said simply. "As a Von der Tann, I have tried to believe that a Rubinroth could not be guilty of such baseness. And now, tell me what your answer is to my proposition."

"We shall return to Lustadt tonight," he replied. "I fear the purpose of Prince Peter. In fact, it may be difficult--even impossible--for us to leave Blentz; but we can at least make the attempt."

"Can we not take Mr. Custer with us?" she asked. "Prince Peter may disregard your majesty's commands and, after you are gone, have him shot. Do not forget that he kept the crown from Peter of Blentz--it is certain that Prince Peter will never forget it."

"I give you my word, your highness, that I know positively that if I leave Blentz tonight Prince Peter will not have Mr. Custer shot in the morning, and it will so greatly jeopardize his own plans if we attempt to release the prisoner that in all probability we ourselves will be unable to escape."

She looked at him thoughtfully for a moment.

"You give me your word that he will be safe?" she asked.

"My royal word," he replied.

"Very well, let us leave at once."

Barney touched the bell once more, and presently an officer of the Blentz faction answered the summons. As the man closed the door and approached, saluting, Barney stepped close to him.

"We are leaving for Tann tonight," he said, "at once. You will conduct us from the castle and procure horses for us. All the time I shall walk at your elbow, and in my hand I shall carry this," and he displayed the king's revolver. "At the first indication of defection upon your part I shall kill you. Do you perfectly understand me?"

"But, your majesty," exclaimed the officer, "why is it necessary that you leave thus surreptitiously? May not the king go and come in his own kingdom as he desires? Let me announce your wishes to Prince Peter that he may furnish you with a proper escort. Doubtless he will wish to accompany you himself, sire."

"You will do precisely what I say without further comment," snapped Barney. "Now get a--" He had been about to say: "Now get a move on you," when it occurred to him that this was not precisely the sort of language that kings were supposed to use to their inferiors. So he changed it. "Now get a couple of horses

for her highness and myself, as well as your own, for you will accompany us to Tann."

The officer looked at the weapon in the king's hand. He measured the distance between himself and the king. He well knew the reputed cowardice of Leopold. Could he make the leap and strike up the king's hand before the timorous monarch found even the courage of the cornered rat to fire at him? Then his eyes sought the face of the king, searching for the signs of nervous terror that would make his conquest an easy one; but what he saw in the eyes that bored straight into his brought his own to the floor at the king's feet.

What new force animated Leopold of Lutha? Those were not the eyes of a coward. No fear was reflected in their steely glitter. The officer mumbled an apology, saluted, and turned toward the door. At his elbow walked the impostor; a cavalry cape that had belonged to the king now covered his shoulders and hid the weapon that pressed its hard warning now and again into the short-ribs of the Blentz officer. Just behind the American came the Princess Emma von der Tann.

The three passed through the deserted corridors of the sleeping castle, taking a route at Barney's suggestion that led them to the stable courtyard without necessitating traversing the main corridors or the great hall or the guardroom, in all of which there still were Austrian and Blentz soldiers, whose duties or pleasures had kept them from their blankets.

At the stables a sleepy groom answered the summons of the officer, whom Barney had warned not to divulge the identity of himself or the princess. He left the princess in the shadows outside the building. After what seemed an eternity to the American, three horses were led into the courtyard, saddled, and bridled. The party mounted and approached the gates. Here, Barney knew, might be encountered the most serious obstacle in their path. He rode close to the side of their unwilling conductor. Leaning forward in his saddle, he whispered in the man's ear.

"Failure to pass us through the gates," he said, "will be the signal for your death."

The man reined in his mount and turned toward the American.

"I doubt if they will pass even me without a written order from Prince Peter," he said. "If they refuse, you must reveal your identity. The guard is composed of Luthanians--I doubt if they will dare refuse your majesty."

Then they rode on up to the gates. A soldier stepped from the sentry box and challenged them.

"Lower the drawbridge," ordered the officer. "It is Captain Krantzwort on a mission for the king."

The soldier approached, raising a lantern, which he had brought from the sentry box, and inspected the captain's face. He seemed ill at ease. In the light of the lantern, the American saw that he was scarce more than a boy--doubtless a recruit. He saw the expression of fear and awe with which he regarded the officer, and it occurred to him that the effect of the king's presence upon him would be absolutely overpowering. Still the soldier hesitated.

"My orders are very strict, sir," he said. "I am to let no one leave without a written order from Prince Peter. If the sergeant or the lieutenant were here they would know what to do; but they are both at the castle--only two other soldiers are at the gates with me. Wait, and I will send one of them for the lieutenant."

"No," interposed the American. "You will send for no one, my man. Come closer--look at my face."

The soldier approached, holding his lantern above his head. As its feeble rays fell upon the face and uniform of the man on horseback, the sentry gave a little gasp of astonishment.

"Now, lower the drawbridge," said Barney Custer, "it is your king's command."

Quickly the fellow hastened to obey the order. The chains creaked and the windlass groaned as the heavy planking sank to place across the moat.

As Barney passed the soldier he handed him the pardon Leopold had written for the American.

"Give this to your lieutenant," he said, "and tell him to hand it to Prince Peter before dawn tomorrow. Do not fail."

A moment later the three were riding down the winding road toward Blentz. Barney had no further need of the officer who rode with them. He would be glad to be rid of him, for he anticipated that the fellow might find ample opportunity to betray them as they passed through the Austrian lines, which they must do to reach Lustadt.

He had told the captain that they were going to Tann in order that, should the man find opportunity to institute pursuit, he might be thrown off the track. The Austrian sentries were no great distance ahead when Barney ordered a halt.

"Dismount," he directed the captain, leaping to the ground himself at the same time. "Put your hands behind your back."

The officer did as he was bid, and Barney bound his wrists securely with a strap and buckle that he had removed from the cantle of his saddle as he rode. Then he led him off the road among some weeds and compelled him to lie down, after which he bound his ankles together and stuffed a gag in his mouth, securing it in place with a bit of stick and the chinstrap from the man's helmet. The threat of the revolver kept Captain Krantzwort silent and obedient throughout the hasty operations.

"Good-bye, captain," whispered Barney, "and let me suggest that you devote the time until your discovery and release in pondering the value of winning your king's confidence in the future. Had you chosen your associates more carefully in the past, this need not have occurred."

Barney unsaddled the captain's horse and turned him loose, then he remounted and, with the princess at his side, rode down toward Blentz.