

## **Chapter X - A NEW KING IN LUTHA**

As the two riders approached the edge of the village of Blentz a sentry barred their way. To his challenge the American replied that they were "friends from the castle."

"Advance," directed the sentry, "and give the countersign."

Barney rode to the fellow's side, and leaning from the saddle whispered in his ear the word "Slankamen."

Would it pass them out as it had passed Maenck in? Barney scarcely breathed as he awaited the result of his experiment. The soldier brought his rifle to present and directed them to pass. With a sigh of relief that was almost audible the two rode into the village and the Austrian lines.

Once within they met with no further obstacle until they reached the last line of sentries upon the far side of the town. It was with more confidence that Barney gave the countersign here, nor was he surprised that the soldier passed them readily; and now they were upon the highroad to Lustadt, with nothing more to bar their way.

For hours they rode on in silence. Barney wanted to talk with his companion, but as king he found nothing to say to her. The girl's mind was filled with morbid reflections of the past few hours and dumb terror for the future. She would keep her promise to the king; but after--life would not be worth the living; why should she live? She glanced at the man beside her in the light of the coming dawn. Ah, why was he so like her American in outward appearances only? Their own mothers could scarce have distinguished them, and yet in character no two men could have differed more widely. The man turned to her.

"We are almost there," he said. "You must be very tired."

The words reflected a consideration that had never been a characteristic of Leopold. The girl began to wonder if there might not possibly be a vein of nobility in the man, after all, that she had never discovered. Since she had entered his apartments at Blentz he had been in every way a different man from the Leopold she had known of old. The boldness of his escape from Blentz supposed a courage that the king had never given the slightest indication of in the past. Could it be that he was making a genuine effort to become a man--to win her respect?

They were approaching Lustadt as the sun rose. A troop of horse was just emerging from the north gate. As it neared them they saw that the cavalymen wore the uniforms of the Royal Horse Guard. At their head rode a lieutenant. As his eyes fell upon the face of the princess and her companion, he brought his troopers to a halt, and, with incredulity plain upon his countenance, advanced to meet them, his hand raised in salute to the king. It was Butzow.

Now Barney was sure that he would be recognized. For two years he and the Luthanian officer had been inseparable. Surely Butzow would penetrate his disguise. He returned his friend's salute, looked him full in the eyes, and asked where he was riding.

"To Blentz, your majesty," replied Butzow, "to demand an audience. I bear important word from Prince von der Tann. He has learned the Austrians are moving an entire army corps into Lutha, together with siege howitzers. Serbia has demanded that all Austrian troops be withdrawn from Luthanian territory at once, and has offered to assist your majesty in maintaining your neutrality by force, if necessary."

As Butzow spoke his eyes were often upon the Princess Emma, and it was quite evident that he was much puzzled to account for her presence with the king. She was supposed to be at Tann, and Butzow knew well enough her estimate of Leopold to know that she would not be in his company of her own volition. His expression as he addressed the man he supposed to be his king was far from deferential. Barney could scarce repress a smile.

"We will ride at once to the palace," he said. "At the gate you may instruct one of your sergeants to telephone to Prince von der Tann that the king is returning and will grant him audience immediately. You and your detachment will will act as our escort."

Butzow saluted and turned to his troopers, giving the necessary commands that brought them about in the wake of the pseudo-king. Once again Barney Custer, of Beatrice, rode into Lustadt as king of Lutha. The few people upon the streets turned to look at him as he passed, but there was little demonstration of love or enthusiasm.

Leopold had awakened no emotions of this sort in the hearts of his subjects. Some there were who still remembered the gallant actions of their ruler on the field of battle when his forces had defeated those of the regent, upon that other occasion when this same American had sat upon the throne of Lutha for two days and had led the little army to victory; but since then the true king had been with them daily in his true colors. Arrogance, haughtiness, and petty tyranny had

marked his reign. Taxes had gone even higher than under the corrupt influence of the Blentz regime. The king's days were spent in bed; his nights in dissipation. Old Ludwig von der Tann seemed Lutha's only friend at court. Him the people loved and trusted.

It was the old chancellor who met them as they entered the palace--the Princess Emma, Lieutenant Butzow, and the false king. As the old man's eyes fell upon his daughter, he gave an exclamation of surprise and of incredulity. He looked from her to the American.

"What is the meaning of this, your majesty?" he cried in a voice hoarse with emotion. "What does her highness in your company?"

There was neither fear nor respect in Prince Ludwig's tone--only anger. He was demanding an accounting from Leopold, the man; not from Leopold, the king. Barney raised his hand.

"Wait," he said, "before you judge. The princess was brought to Blentz by Prince Peter. She will tell you that I have aided her to escape and that I have accorded her only such treatment as a woman has a right to expect from a king."

The girl inclined her head.

"His majesty has been most kind," she said. "He has treated me with every consideration and respect, and I am convinced that he was not a willing party to my arrest and forcible detention at Blentz; or," she added, "if he was, he regretted his action later and has made full reparation by bringing me to Lustadt."

Prince von der Tann found difficulty in hiding his surprise at this evidence of chivalry in the cowardly king. But for his daughter's testimony he could not have believed it possible that it lay within the nature of Leopold of Lutha to have done what he had done within the past few hours.

He bowed low before the man who wore the king's uniform. The American extended his hand, and Von der Tann, taking it in his own, raised it to his lips.

"And now," said Barney briskly, "let us go to my apartments and get to work. Your highness"--and he turned toward the Princess Emma--"must be greatly fatigued. Lieutenant Butzow, you will see that a suite is prepared for her highness. Afterward you may call upon Count Zellerndorf, whom I understand returned to Lustadt yesterday, and notify him that I will receive him in an hour. Inform the Serbian minister that I desire his presence at the palace immediately. Lose no time, lieutenant, and be sure to impress upon the Serbian minister that immediately means immediately."

Butzow saluted and the Princess Emma curtsied, as the king turned and, slipping his arm through that of Prince Ludwig, walked away in the direction of the royal apartments. Once at the king's desk Barney turned toward the chancellor. In his mind was the determination to save Lutha if Lutha could be saved. He had been forced to place the king in a position where he would be helpless, though that he would have been equally as helpless upon his throne the American did not doubt for an instant. However, the course of events had placed within his hands the power to serve not only Lutha but the house of Von der Tann as well. He would do in the king's place what the king should have done if the king had been a man.

"Now, Prince Ludwig," he said, "tell me just what conditions we must face. Remember that I have been at Blentz and that there the King of Lutha is not apt to learn all that transpires in Lustadt."

"Sire," replied the chancellor, "we face a grave crisis. Not only is there within Lutha the small force of Austrian troops that surround Blentz, but now an entire army corps has crossed the border. Unquestionably they are marching on Lustadt. The emperor is going to take no chances. He sent the first force into Lutha to compel Serbian intervention and draw Serbian troops from the Austro-Serbian battle line. Serbia has withheld her forces at my request, but she will not withhold them for long. We must make a declaration at once. If we declare against Austria we are faced by the menace of the Austrian troops already within our boundaries, but we shall have Serbia to help us.

"A Serbian army corps is on the frontier at this moment awaiting word from Lutha. If it is adverse to Austria that army corps will cross the border and march to our assistance. If it is favorable to Austria it will none the less cross into Lutha, but as enemies instead of allies. Serbia has acted honorably toward Lutha. She has not violated our neutrality. She has no desire to increase her possessions in this direction.

"On the other hand, Austria has violated her treaty with us. She has marched troops into our country and occupied the town of Blentz. Constantly in the past she has incited internal discord. She is openly championing the Blentz cause, which at last I trust your majesty has discovered is inimical to your interests.

"If Austria is victorious in her war with Serbia, she will find some pretext to hold Lutha whether Lutha takes her stand either for or against her. And most certainly is this true if it occurs that Austrian troops are still within the boundaries of Lutha when peace is negotiated. Not only our honor but our very existence demands that there be no Austrian troops in Lutha at the close of this war. If we

cannot force them across the border we can at least make such an effort as will win us the respect of the world and a voice in the peace negotiations.

"If we must bow to the surrender of our national integrity, let us do so only after we have exhausted every resource of the country in our country's defense. In the past your majesty has not appeared to realize the menace of your most powerful neighbor. I beg of you, sire, to trust me. Believe that I have only the interests of Lutha at heart, and let us work together for the salvation of our country and your majesty's throne."

Barney laid his hand upon the old man's shoulder. It seemed a shame to carry the deception further, but the American well knew that only so could he accomplish aught for Lutha or the Von der Tanns. Once the old chancellor suspected the truth as to his identity he would be the first to denounce him.

"I think that you and I can work together, Prince Ludwig," he said. "I have sent for the Serbian and Austrian ministers. The former should be here immediately."

Nor did they have long to wait before the tall Slav was announced. Barney lost no time in getting down to business. He asked no questions. What Von der Tann had told him, what he had seen with his own eyes since he had entered Lutha, and what he had overheard in the inn at Burgova was sufficient evidence that the fate of Lutha hung upon the prompt and energetic decisions of the man who sat upon Lutha's throne for the next few days.

Had Leopold been the present incumbent Lutha would have been lost, for that he would play directly into the hands of Austria was not to be questioned. Were Von der Tann to seize the reins of government a state of revolution would exist that would divide the state into two bitter factions, weaken its defense, and give Austria what she most desired--a plausible pretext for intervention.

Lutha's only hope lay in united defense of her liberties under the leadership of the one man whom all acknowledged king--Leopold. Very well, Barney Custer, of Beatrice, would be Leopold for a few days, since the real Leopold had proven himself incompetent to meet the emergency.

General Petko, the Serbian minister to Lutha, brought to the audience the memory of a series of unpleasant encounters with the king. Leopold had never exerted himself to hide his pro-Austrian sentiments. Austria was a powerful country--Serbia, a relatively weak neighbor. Leopold, being a royal snob, had courted the favor of the emperor and turned up his nose at Serbia. The general was prepared for a repetition of the veiled affronts that Leopold delighted in according him; but this time he brought with him a reply that for two years he

had been living in the hope of some day being able to deliver to the young monarch he so cordially despised.

It was an ultimatum from his government--an ultimatum couched in terms from which all diplomatic suavity had been stripped. If Barney Custer, of Beatrice, could have read it he would have smiled, for in plain American it might have been described as announcing to Leopold precisely "where he got off." But Barney did not have the opportunity to read it, since that ultimatum was never delivered.

Barney took the wind all out of it by his first words. "Your excellency may wonder why it is that we have summoned you at such an early hour," he said.

General Petko inclined his head in deferential acknowledgment of the truth of the inference.

"It is because we have learned from our chancellor," continued the American, "that Serbia has mobilized an entire army corps upon the Luthanian frontier. Am I correctly informed?"

General Petko squared his shoulders and bowed in assent. At the same time he reached into his breast-pocket for the ultimatum.

"Good!" exclaimed Barney, and then he leaned close to the ear of the Serbian. "How long will it take to move that army corps to Lustadt?"

General Petko gasped and returned the ultimatum to his pocket.

"Sire!" he cried, his face lighting with incredulity. "You mean--"

"I mean," said the American, "that if Serbia will loan Lutha an army corps until the Austrians have evacuated Luthanian territory, Lutha will loan Serbia an army corps until such time as peace is declared between Serbia and Austria. Other than this neither government will incur any obligations to the other.

"We may not need your help, but it will do us no harm to have them well on the way toward Lustadt as quickly as possible. Count Zellerndorf will be here in a few minutes. We shall, through him, give Austria twenty-four hours to withdraw all her troops beyond our frontiers. The army of Lutha is mobilized before Lustadt. It is not a large army, but with the help of Serbia it should be able to drive the Austrians from the country, provided they do not leave of their own accord."

General Petko smiled. So did the American and the chancellor. Each knew that Austria would not withdraw her army from Lutha.

"With your majesty's permission I will withdraw," said the Serbian, "and transmit Lutha's proposition to my government; but I may say that your majesty need have

no apprehension but that a Serbian army corps will be crossing into Lutha before noon today."

"And now, Prince Ludwig," said the American after the Serbian had bowed himself out of the apartment, "I suggest that you take immediate steps to entrench a strong force north of Lustadt along the road to Blentz."

Von der Tann smiled as he replied. "It is already done, sire," he said.

"But I passed in along the road this morning," said Barney, "and saw nothing of such preparations."

"The trenches and the soldiers were there, nevertheless, sire," replied the old man, "only a little gap was left on either side of the highway that those who came and went might not suspect our plans and carry word of them to the Austrians. A few hours will complete the link across the road."

"Good! Let it be completed at once. Here is Count Zellerndorf now," as the minister was announced.

Von der Tann bowed himself out as the Austrian entered the king's presence. For the first time in two years the chancellor felt that the destiny of Lutha was safe in the hands of her king. What had caused the metamorphosis in Leopold he could not guess. He did not seem to be the same man that had whined and growled at their last audience a week before.

The Austrian minister entered the king's presence with an expression of ill-concealed surprise upon his face. Two days before he had left Leopold safely ensconced at Blentz, where he was to have remained indefinitely. He glanced hurriedly about the room in search of Prince Peter or another of the conspirators who should have been with the king. He saw no one. The king was speaking. The Austrian's eyes went wider, not only at the words, but at the tone of voice.

"Count Zellerndorf," said the American, "you were doubtless aware of the embarrassment under which the king of Lutha was compelled at Blentz to witness the entry of a foreign army within his domain. But we are not now at Blentz. We have summoned you that you may receive from us, and transmit to your emperor, the expression of our surprise and dismay at the unwarranted violation of Luthanian neutrality."

"But, your majesty--" interrupted the Austrian.

"But nothing, your excellency," snapped the American. "The moment for diplomacy is passed; the time for action has come. You will oblige us by

transmitting to your government at once a request that every Austrian soldier now in Lutha be withdrawn by noon tomorrow."

Zellerndorf looked his astonishment.

"Are you mad, sire?" he cried. "It will mean war!"

"It is what Austria has been looking for," snapped the American, "and what people look for they usually get, especially if they chance to be looking for trouble. When can you expect a reply from Vienna?"

"By noon, your majesty," replied the Austrian, "but are you irretrievably bound to your present policy? Remember the power of Austria, sire. Think of your throne. Think--"

"We have thought of everything," interrupted Barney. "A throne means less to us than you may imagine, count; but the honor of Lutha means a great deal."