

## Chapter XI - THE BATTLE

At five o'clock that afternoon the sidewalks bordering Margaretha Street were crowded with promenaders. The little tables before the cafes were filled. Nearly everyone spoke of the great war and of the peril which menaced Lutha. Upon many a lip was open disgust at the supine attitude of Leopold of Lutha in the face of an Austrian invasion of his country. Discontent was open. It was ripening to something worse for Leopold than an Austrian invasion.

Presently a sergeant of the Royal Horse Guards cantered down the street from the palace. He stopped here and there, and, dismounting, tacked placards in conspicuous places. At the notice, and in each instance cheers and shouting followed the sergeant as he rode on to the next stop.

Now, at each point men and women were gathered, eagerly awaiting an explanation of the jubilation farther up the street. Those whom the sergeant passed called to him for an explanation, and not receiving it, followed in a quickly growing mob that filled Margaretha Street from wall to wall. When he dismounted he had almost to fight his way to the post or door upon which he was to tack the next placard. The crowd surged about him in its anxiety to read what the placard bore, and then, between the cheering and yelling, those in the front passed back to the crowd the tidings that filled them with so great rejoicing.

"Leopold has declared war on Austria!" "The king calls for volunteers!" "Long live the king!"

The battle of Lustadt has passed into history. Outside of the little kingdom of Lutha it received but passing notice by the world at large, whose attention was riveted upon the great conflicts along the banks of the Meuse, the Marne, and the Aisne. But in Lutha! Ah, it will be told and retold, handed down from mouth to mouth and from generation to generation to the end of time.

How the cavalry that the king sent north toward Blentz met the advancing Austrian army. How, fighting, they fell back upon the infantry which lay, a thin line that stretched east and west across the north of Lustadt, in its first line of trenches. A pitifully weak line it was, numerically, in comparison with the forces of the invaders; but it stood its ground heroically, and from the heights to the north of the city the fire from the forts helped to hold the enemy in check for many hours.

And then the enemy succeeded in bringing up their heavy artillery to the ridge that lies three miles north of the forts. Shells were bursting in the trenches, the forts, and the city. To the south a stream of terror-stricken refugees was pouring out of Lustadt along the King's Road. Rich and poor, animated by a common impulse, filled the narrow street that led to the city's southern gate. Carts drawn by dogs, laden donkeys, French limousines, victorias, wheelbarrows--every conceivable wheeled vehicle and beast of burden--were jammed in a seemingly inextricable tangle in the mad rush for safety.

Rumor passed back and forth through the fleeing thousands. Now came word that Fort No. 2 had been silenced by the Austrian guns. Immediately followed news that the Luthanian line was falling back upon the city. Fear turned to panic. Men fought to outdistance their neighbors.

A shell burst upon a roof-top in an adjoining square.

Women fainted and were trampled. Hoarse shouts of anger mingled with screams of terror, and then into the midst of it from Margaretha Street rode a man on horseback. Behind him were a score of officers. A trumpeter raised his instrument to his lips, and above the din of the fleeing multitude rose the sharp, triple call that announces the coming of the king. The mob halted and turned.

Looking down upon them from his saddle was Leopold of Lutha. His palm was raised for silence and there was a smile upon his lips. Quite suddenly, and as by a miracle, fear left them. They made a line for him and his staff to ride through. One of the officers turned in his saddle to address a civilian friend in an automobile.

"His majesty is riding to the firing line," he said and he raised his voice that many might hear. Quickly the word passed from mouth to mouth, and as Barney Custer, of Beatrice, passed along Margaretha Street he was followed by a mad din of cheering that drowned the booming of the distant cannon and the bursting of the shells above the city.

The balance of the day the pseudo-king rode back and forth along his lines. Three of his staff were killed and two horses were shot from beneath him, but from the moment that he appeared the Luthanian line ceased to waver or fall back. The advanced trenches that they had abandoned to the Austrians they took again at the point of the bayonet. Charge after charge they repulsed, and all the time there hovered above the enemy Lutha's sole aeroplane, watching, watching, ever watching for the coming of the allies. Somewhere to the northeast the Serbians were advancing toward Lustadt. Would they come in time?

It was five o'clock in the morning of the second day, and though the Luthanian line still held, Barney Custer knew that it could not hold for long. The Austrian artillery fire, which had been rather wild the preceding day, had now become of deadly accuracy. Each bursting shell filled some part of the trenches with dead and wounded, and though their places were taken by fresh men from the reserve, there would soon be no reserve left to call upon.

At his left, in the rear, the American had massed the bulk of his reserves, and at the foot of the heights north of the city and just below the forts the major portion of the cavalry was drawn up in the shelter of a little ravine. Barney's eyes were fixed upon the soaring aeroplane.

In his hand was his watch. He would wait another fifteen minutes, and if by then the signal had not come that the Serbians were approaching, he would strike the blow that he had decided upon. From time to time he glanced at his watch.

The fifteen minutes had almost elapsed when there fluttered from the tiny monoplane a paper parachute. It dropped for several hundred feet before it spread to the air pressure and floated more gently toward the earth and a moment later there burst from its basket a puff of white smoke. Two more parachutes followed the first and two more puffs of smoke. Then the machine darted rapidly off toward the northeast.

Barney turned to Prince von der Tann with a smile. "They are none too soon," he said.

The old prince bowed in acquiescence. He had been very happy for two days. Lutha might be defeated now, but she could never be subdued. She had a king at last--a real king. Gott! How he had changed. It reminded Prince von der Tann of the day he had ridden beside the imposter two years before in the battle with the forces of Peter of Blentz. Many times he had caught himself scrutinizing the face of the monarch, searching for some proof that after all he was not Leopold.

"Direct the commanders of forts three and four to concentrate their fire on the enemy's guns directly north of Fort No. 3," Barney directed an aide.

"Simultaneously let the cavalry and Colonel Kazov's infantry make a determined assault on the Austrian trenches."

Then he turned his horse toward the left of his line, where, a little to the rear, lay the fresh troops that he had been holding in readiness against this very moment. As he galloped across the plain, his staff at his heels, shrapnel burst about them. Von der Tann spurred to his side.

"Sire," he cried, "it is unnecessary that you take such grave risks. Your staff is ready and willing to perform such service that you may be preserved to your people and your throne."

"I believe the men fight better when they think their king is watching them," said the American simply.

"I know it, sire," replied Von der Tann, "but even so, Lutha could ill afford to lose you now. I thank God, your majesty, that I have lived to see this day--to see the last of the Rubinroths upholding the glorious traditions of the Rubinroth blood."

Barney led the reserves slowly through the wood to the rear of the extreme left of his line. The attack upon the Austrian right center appeared to be meeting with much greater success than the American dared to hope for. Already, through his glasses, he could see indications that the enemy was concentrating a larger force at this point to repulse the vicious assaults of the Luthanians. To do this they must be drawing from their reserves back of other portions of their line.

It was what Barney had desired. The three bombs from the aeroplane had told him that the Serbians had been sighted three miles away. Already they were engaging the Austrians. He could hear the rattle of rifles and quick-firers and the roar of cannon far to the northeast. And now he gave the word to the commander of the reserve.

At a rapid trot the men moved forward behind the extreme left end of the Luthanian left wing. They were almost upon the Austrians before they emerged from the shelter of the wood, and then with hoarse shouts and leveled bayonets they charged the enemy's position. The fight there was the bloodiest of the two long days. Back and forth the tide of battle surged. In the thick of it rode the false king encouraging his men to greater effort. Slowly at last they bore the Austrians from their trenches. Back and back they bore them until retreat became a rout. The Austrian right was crumpled back upon its center!

Here the enemy made a determined stand; but just before dark a great shouting arose from the heights to their left, where the bulk of their artillery was stationed. Both the Luthanian and Austrian troops engaged in the plain saw Austrian infantry and artillery running down the slopes in disorderly rout. Upon their heads came a cheering line of soldiers firing as they ran, and above them waved the battleflag of Serbia.

A mighty shout rose from the Luthanian ranks--an answering groan from the throats of the Austrians. Hemmed in between the two lines of allies, the Austrians were helpless. Their artillery was captured, retreat cut off. There was but a single alternative to massacre--the white flag.

A few regiments between Lustadt and Blentz, but nearer the latter town, escaped back into Austria, the balance Barney arranged with the Serbian minister to have taken back to Serbia as prisoners of war. The Luthanian army corps that the American had promised the Serbs was to be utilized along the Austrian frontier to prevent the passage of Austrian troops into Serbia through Lutha.

The return to Lustadt after the battle was made through cheering troops and along streets choked with joy-mad citizenry. The name of the soldier-king was upon every tongue. Men went wild with enthusiasm as the tall figure rode slowly through the crowd toward the palace.

Von der Tann, grim and martial, found his lids damp with the moisture of a great happiness. Even now with all the proofs of reality about him, it seemed impossible that this scene could be aught but the ephemeral vapors of a dream--that Leopold of Lutha, the coward, the craven, could have become in a single day the heroic figure that had loomed so large upon the battlefield of Lustadt--the simple, modest gentleman who received the plaudits of his subjects with bowed head and humble mien.

As Barney Custer rode up Margaretha Street toward the royal palace of the kings of Lutha, a dust-covered horseman in the uniform of an officer of the Horse Guards entered Lustadt from the south. It was the young aide of Prince von der Tann's staff, who had been sent to Blentz nearly a week earlier with a message for the king, and who had been captured and held by the Austrians.

During the battle before Lustadt all the Austrian troops had been withdrawn from Blentz and hurried to the front. It was then that the aide had been transferred to the castle, from which he had escaped early that morning. To reach Lustadt he had been compelled to circle the Austrian position, coming to Lustadt from the south.

Once within the city he rode straight to the palace, flung himself from his jaded mount, and entered the left wing of the building--the wing in which the private apartments of the chancellor were located.

Here he inquired for the Princess Emma, learning with evident relief that she was there. A moment later, white with dust, his face streamed with sweat, he was ushered into her presence.

"Your highness," he blurted, "the king's commands have been disregarded--the American is to be shot tomorrow. I have just escaped from Blentz. Peter is furious. He realizes that whether the Austrians win or lose, his standing with the king is gone forever.

"In a fit of rage he has ordered that Mr. Custer be sacrificed to his desire for revenge, in the hope that it will insure for him the favor of the Austrians. Something must be done at once if he is to be saved."

For a moment the girl swayed as though about to fall. The young officer stepped quickly to support her, but before he reached her side she had regained complete mastery of herself. From the street without there rose the blare of trumpets and the cheering of the populace.

Through senses numb with the cold of anguish the meaning of the tumult slowly filtered to her brain--the king had come. He was returning from the battlefield, covered with honors and flushed with glory--the man who was to be her husband; but there was no rejoicing in the heart of the Princess Emma.

Instead, there was a dull ache and impotent rebellion at the injustice of the thing--that Leopold should be reaping these great rewards, while he who had made it possible for him to be a king at all was to die on the morrow because of what he had done to place the Rubinroth upon his throne.

"Perhaps Lieutenant Butzow might find a way," suggested the officer. "He or your father; they are both fond of Mr. Custer."

"Yes," said the girl dully, "see Lieutenant Butzow--he would do the most."

The officer bowed and hastened from the apartment in search of Butzow. The girl approached the window and stood there for a long time, looking out at the surging multitude that pressed around the palace gates, filling Margaretha Street with a solid mass of happy faces.

They cheered the king, the chancellor, the army; but most often they cheered the king. From a despised monarch Leopold had risen in a single bound to the position of a national idol.

Repeatedly he was called to the balcony over the grand entrance that the people might feast their eyes on him. The princess wondered how long it was before she herself would be forced to offer her congratulations and, perchance, suffer his caresses. She shivered and cringed at the thought, and then there came a knock upon the door, and in answer to her permission it opened, and the king stood upon the threshold alone.

At a glance the man took in the pain and sorrow mirrored upon the girl's face. He stepped quickly across the room toward her.

"What is it?" he asked. "What is the matter?"

For a moment he had forgotten the part that he had been playing--forgot that the Princess Emma was ignorant of his identity. He had come to her to share with her the happiness of the hour--the glory of the victorious arms of Lutha. For a time he had almost forgotten that he was not the king, and now he was forgetting that he was not Barney Custer to the girl who stood before him with misery and hopelessness writ so large upon her countenance.

For a brief instant the girl did not reply. She was weighing the problematical value of an attempt to enlist the king in the cause of the American. Leopold had shown a spark of magnanimity when he had written a pardon for Mr. Custer; might he not rise again above his petty jealousy and save the American's life? It was a forlorn hope to the woman who knew the true Leopold so well; but it was a hope.

"What is the matter?" the king repeated.

"I have just received word that Prince Peter has ignored your commands, sire," replied the girl, "and that Mr. Custer is to be shot tomorrow."

Barney's eyes went wide with incredulity. Here was a pretty pass, indeed! The princess came close to him and seized his arm.

"You promised, sire," she said, "that he would not be harmed--you gave your royal word. You can save him. You have an army at your command. Do not forget that he once saved you."

The note of appeal in her voice and the sorrow in her eyes gave Barney Custer a twinge of compunction. The necessity for longer concealing his identity in so far as the salvation of Lutha was concerned seemed past; but the American had intended to carry the deception to the end.

He had given the matter much thought, but he could find no grounds for belief that Emma von der Tann would be any happier in the knowledge that her future husband had had nothing to do with the victory of his army. If she was doomed to a life at his side, why not permit her the grain of comfort that she might derive from the memory of her husband's achievements upon the battlefield of Lustadt? Why rob her of that little?

But now, face to face with her, and with the evidence of her suffering so plain before him, Barney's intentions wavered. Like most fighting men, he was tender in his dealings with women. And now the last straw came in the form of a single tiny tear that trickled down the girl's cheek. He seized the hand that lay upon his arm.

"Your highness," he said, "do not grieve for the American. He is not worth it. He has deceived you. He is not at Blentz."

The girl drew her hand from his and straightened to her full height.

"What do you mean, sire?" she exclaimed. "Mr. Custer would not deceive me even if he had an opportunity--which he has not had. But if he is not at Blentz, where is he?"

Barney bowed his head and looked at the floor.

"He is here, your highness, asking your forgiveness," he said.

There was a puzzled expression upon the girl's face as she looked at the man before her. She did not understand. Why should she? Barney drew a diamond ring from his little finger and held it out to her.

"You gave it to me to cut a hole in the window of the garage where I stole the automobile," he said. "I forgot to return it. Now do you know who I am?"

Emma von der Tann's eyes showed her incredulity; then, act by act, she recalled all that this man had said and done since they had escaped from Blentz that had been so unlike the king she knew.

"When did you assume the king's identity?" she asked.

Barney told her all that had transpired in the king's apartments at Blentz before she had been conducted to the king's presence.

"And Leopold is there now?" she asked.

"He is there," replied Barney, "and he is to be shot in the morning."

"Gott!" exclaimed the girl. "What are we to do?"

"There is but one thing to do," replied the American, "and that is for Butzow and me to ride to Blentz as fast as horses will carry us and rescue the king."

"And then?" asked the girl, a shadow crossing her face.

"And then Barney Custer will have to beat it for the boundary," he replied with a sorry smile.

She came quite close to him, laying her hands upon his shoulders.

"I cannot give you up now," she said simply. "I have tried to be loyal to Leopold and the promise that my father made his king when I was only a little girl; but



since I thought that you were to be shot, I have wished a thousand times that I had gone with you to America two years ago. Take me with you now, Barney. We can send Lieutenant Butzow to rescue the king, and before he has returned we can be safe across the Serbian frontier."

The American shook his head.

"I got the king into this mess and I must get him out," he said. "He may deserve to be shot, but it is up to me to prevent it, if I can. And there is your father to consider. If Butzow rides to Blentz and rescues the king, it may be difficult to get him back to Lustadt without the truth of his identity and mine becoming known. With me there, the change can be effected easily, and not even Butzow need know what has happened.

"If the people should guess that it was not Leopold who won the battle of Lustadt there might be the devil to pay, and your father would go down along with the throne. No, I must stay until Leopold is safe in Lustadt. But there is a hope for us. I may be able to wrest from Leopold his sanction of our marriage. I shall not hesitate to use threats to get it, and I rather imagine that he will be in such a terror-stricken condition that he will assent to any terms for his release from Blentz. If he gives me such a paper, Emma, will you marry me?"

Perhaps there never had been a stranger proposal than this; but to neither did it seem strange. For two years each had known the love of the other. The girl's betrothal to the king had prevented an avowal of their love while Barney posed in his own identity. Now they merely accepted the conditions that had existed for two years as though a matter of fact which had been often discussed between them.

"Of course I'll marry you," said the princess. "Why in the world would I want you to take me to America otherwise?"

As Barney Custer took her in his arms he was happier than he had ever before been in all his life, and so, too, was the Princess Emma von der Tann.