

Chapter XII - LEOPOLD WAITS FOR DAWN

After the American had shoved him through the secret doorway into the tower room of the castle of Blentz, Leopold had stood for several minutes waiting for the next command from his captor. Presently, hearing no sound other than that of his own breathing, the king ventured to speak. He asked the American what he purposed doing with him next.

There was no reply. For another minute the king listened intently; then he raised his hands and removed the bandage from his eyes. He looked about him. The room was vacant except for himself. He recognized it as the one in which he had spent ten years of his life as a prisoner. He shuddered. What had become of the American? He approached the door and listened. Beyond the panels he could hear the two soldiers on guard there conversing. He called to them.

"What do you want?" shouted one of the men through the closed door.

"I want Prince Peter!" yelled the king. "Send him at once!"

The soldiers laughed.

"He wants Prince Peter," they mocked. "Wouldn't you rather have us send the king to you?" they asked.

"I am the king!" yelled Leopold. "I am the king! Open the door, pigs, or it will go hard with you! I shall have you both shot in the morning if you do not open the door and fetch Prince Peter."

"Ah!" exclaimed one of the soldiers. "Then there will be three of us shot together."

Leopold went white. He had not connected the sentence of the American with himself; but now, quite vividly, he realized what it might mean to him if he failed before dawn to convince someone that he was not the American. Peter would not be awake at so early an hour, and if he had no better success with others than he was having with these soldiers, it was possible that he might be led out and shot before his identity was discovered. The thing was preposterous. The king's knees became suddenly quite weak. They shook, and his legs gave beneath his weight so that he had to lean against the back of a chair to keep from falling.

Once more he turned to the soldiers. This time he pleaded with them, begging them to carry word to Prince Peter that a terrible mistake had been made, and that it was the king and not the American who was confined in the death

chamber. But the soldiers only laughed at him, and finally threatened to come in and beat him if he again interrupted their conversation.

It was a white and shaken prisoner that the officer of the guard found when he entered the room at dawn. The man before him, his face streaked with tears of terror and self-pity, fell upon his knees before him, beseeching him to carry word to Peter of Blentz, that he was the king. The officer drew away with a gesture of disgust.

"I might well believe from your actions that you are Leopold," he said; "for, by Heaven, you do not act as I have always imagined the American would act in the face of danger. He has a reputation for bravery that would suffer could his admirers see him now."

"But I am not the American," pleaded the king. "I tell you that the American came to my apartments last night, overpowered me, forced me to change clothing with him, and then led me back here."

A sudden inspiration came to the king with the memory of all that had transpired during that humiliating encounter with the American.

"I signed a pardon for him!" he cried. "He forced me to do so. If you think I am the American, you cannot kill me now, for there is a pardon signed by the king, and an order for the American's immediate release. Where is it? Do not tell me that Prince Peter did not receive it."

"He received it," replied the officer, "and I am here to acquaint you with the fact, but Prince Peter said nothing about your release. All he told me was that you were not to be shot this morning," and the man emphasized the last two words.

Leopold of Lutha spent two awful days a prisoner at Blentz, not knowing at what moment Prince Peter might see fit to carry out the verdict of the Austrian court martial. He could convince no one that he was the king. Peter would not even grant him an audience. Upon the evening of the third day, word came that the Austrians had been defeated before Lustadt, and those that were not prisoners were retreating through Blentz toward the Austrian frontier.

The news filtered to Leopold's prison room through the servant who brought him his scant and rough fare. The king was utterly disheartened before this word reached him. For the moment he seemed to see a ray of hope, for, since the impostor had been victorious, he would be in a position to force Peter of Blentz to give up the true king.

There was the chance that the American, flushed with success and power, might elect to hold the crown he had seized. Who would guess the transfer that had been effected, or, guessing, would dare voice his suspicions in the face of the power and popularity that Leopold knew such a victory as the impostor had won must have given him in the hearts and minds of the people of Lutha? Still, there was a bare possibility that the American would be as good as his word, and return the crown as he had promised. Though he hated to admit it, the king had every reason to believe that the impostor was a man of honor, whose bare word was as good as another's bond.

He was commencing, under this line of reasoning, to achieve a certain hopeful content when the door to his prison opened and Peter of Blentz, black and scowling, entered. At his elbow was Captain Ernst Maenck.

"Leopold has defeated the Austrians," announced the former. "Until you returned to Lutha he considered the Austrians his best friends. I do not know how you could have reached or influenced him. It is to learn how you accomplished it that I am here. The fact that he signed your pardon indicates that his attitude toward you changed suddenly--almost within an hour. There is something at the bottom of it all, and that something I must know."

"I am Leopold!" cried the king. "Don't you recognize me, Prince Peter? Look at me! Maenck must know me. It was I who wrote and signed the American's pardon--at the point of the American's revolver. He forced me to exchange clothing with him, and then he brought me here to this room and left me."

The two men looked at the speaker and smiled.

"You bank too strongly, my friend," said Peter of Blentz, "upon your resemblance to the king of Lutha. I will admit that it is strong, but not so strong as to convince me of the truth of so improbable a story. How in the world could the American have brought you through the castle, from one end to the other, unseen? There was a guard before the king's door and another before this. No, Herr Custer, you will have to concoct a more plausible tale.

"No," and Peter of Blentz scowled savagely, as though to impress upon his listener the importance of his next utterance, "there were more than you and the king involved in his sudden departure from Blentz and in his hasty change of policy toward Austria. To be quite candid, it seems to me that it may be necessary to my future welfare--vitally necessary, I may say--to know precisely how all this occurred, and just what influence you have over Leopold of Lutha. Who was it that acted as the go-between in the king's negotiations with you, or rather, yours

with the king? And what argument did you bring to bear to force Leopold to the action he took?"

"I have told you all that I know about the matter," whined the king. "The American appeared suddenly in my apartment. When he brought me here he first blindfolded me. I have no idea by what route we traveled through the castle, and unless your guards outside this door were bribed they can tell you more about how we got in here than I can--provided we entered through that doorway," and the king pointed to the door which had just opened to admit his two visitors.

"Oh, pshaw!" exclaimed Maenck. "There is but one door to this room--if the king came in here at all, he came through that door."

"Enough!" cried Peter of Blentz. "I shall not be trifled with longer. I shall give you until tomorrow morning to make a full explanation of the truth and to form some plan whereby you may utilize once more whatever influence you had over Leopold to the end that he grant to myself and my associates his royal assurance that our lives and property will be safe in Lutha."

"But I tell you it is impossible," wailed the king.

"I think not," sneered Prince Peter, "especially when I tell you that if you do not accede to my wishes the order of the Austrian military court that sentenced you to death at Burgova will be carried out in the morning."

With his final words the two men turned and left the room. Behind them, upon the floor, inarticulate with terror, knelt Leopold of Lutha, his hands outstretched in supplication.

The long night wore its weary way to dawn at last. The sleepless man, alternately tossing upon his bed and pacing the floor, looked fearfully from time to time at the window through which the lightening of the sky would proclaim the coming day and his last hour on earth. His windows faced the west. At the foot of the hill beneath the castle nestled the village of Blentz, once more enveloped in peaceful silence since the Austrians were gone.

An unmistakable lessening of the darkness in the east had just announced the proximity of day, when the king heard a clatter of horses' hoofs upon the road before the castle. The sound ceased at the gates and a loud voice broke out upon the stillness of the dying night demanding entrance "in the name of the king."

New hope burst aflame in the breast of the condemned man. The impostor had not forsaken him. Leopold ran to the window, leaning far out. He heard the voices of the sentries in the barbican as they conversed with the newcomers. Then

silence came, broken only by the rapid footsteps of a soldier hastening from the gate to the castle. His hobnail shoes pounding upon the cobbles of the courtyard echoed among the angles of the lofty walls. When he had entered the castle the silence became oppressive. For five minutes there was no sound other than the pawing of the horses outside the barbican and the subdued conversation of their riders.

Presently the soldier emerged from the castle. With him was an officer. The two went to the barbican. Again there was a parley between the horsemen and the guard. Leopold could hear the officer demanding terms. He would lower the drawbridge and admit them upon conditions.

One of these the king overheard--it concerned an assurance of full pardon for Peter of Blentz and the garrison; and again Leopold heard the officer addressing someone as "your majesty."

Ah, the impostor was there in person. Ach, Gott! How Leopold of Lutha hated him, and yet, in the hands of this American lay not only his throne but his very life as well.

Evidently the negotiations proved unsuccessful for after a time the party wheeled their horses from the gate and rode back toward Blentz. As the sound of the iron-shod hoofs diminished in the distance, with them diminished the hopes of the king.

When they ceased entirely his hopes were at an end, to be supplanted by renewed terror at the turning of the knob of his prison door as it swung open to admit Maenck and a squad of soldiers.

"Come!" ordered the captain. "The king has refused to intercede in your behalf. When he returns with his army he will find your body at the foot of the west wall in the courtyard."

With an ear-piercing shriek that rang through the grim old castle, Leopold of Lutha flung his arms above his head and lunged forward upon his face. Roughly the soldiers seized the unconscious man and dragged him from the room.

Along the corridor they hauled him and down the winding stairs within the north tower to the narrow slit of a door that opened upon the courtyard. To the foot of the west wall they brought him, tossing him brutally to the stone flagging. Here one of the soldiers brought a flagon of water and dashed it in the face of the king. The cold douche returned Leopold to a consciousness of the nearness of his impending fate.

He saw the little squad of soldiers before him. He saw the cold, gray wall behind, and, above, the cold, gray sky of early dawn. The dismal men leaning upon their shadowy guns seemed unearthly specters in the weird light of the hour that is neither God's day nor devil's night. With difficulty two of them dragged Leopold to his feet.

Then the dismal men formed in line before him at the opposite side of the courtyard. Maenck stood to the left of them. He was giving commands. They fell upon the doomed man's ears with all the cruelty of physical blows. Tears coursed down his white cheeks. With incoherent mumblings he begged for his life. Leopold, King of Lutha, trembling in the face of death!