

### **Chapter XIII - THE TWO KINGS**

Twenty troopers had ridden with Lieutenant Butzow and the false king from Lustadt to Blentz. During the long, hard ride there had been little or no conversation between the American and his friend, for Butzow was still unsuspecting of the true identity of the man who posed as the ruler of Lutha. The lieutenant was all anxiety to reach Blentz and rescue the American he thought imprisoned there and in danger of being shot.

At the gate they were refused admittance unless the king would accept conditions. Barney refused--there was another way to gain entrance to Blentz that not even the master of Blentz knew. Butzow urged him to accede to anything to save the life of the American. He recalled all that the latter had done in the service of Lutha and Leopold. Barney leaned close to the other's ear.

"If they have not already shot him," he whispered, "we shall save the prisoner yet. Let them think that we give up and are returning to Lustadt. Then follow me."

Slowly the little cavalcade rode down from the castle of Blentz toward the village. Just out of sight of the grim pile where the road wound down into a ravine Barney turned his horse's head up the narrow defile. In single file Butzow and the troopers followed until the rank undergrowth precluded farther advance. Here the American directed that they dismount, and, leaving the horses in charge of three troopers, set out once more with the balance of the company on foot.

It was with difficulty that the men forced their way through the bushes, but they had not gone far when their leader stopped before a sheer wall of earth and stone, covered with densely growing shrubbery. Here he groped in the dim light, feeling his way with his hands before him, while at his heels came his followers. At last he separated a wall of bushes and disappeared within the aperture his hands had made. One by one his men followed, finding themselves in inky darkness, but upon a smooth stone floor and with stone walls close upon either hand. Those who lifted their hands above their heads discovered an arched stone ceiling close above them.

Along this buried corridor the "king" led them, for though he had never traversed it himself the Princess Emma had, and from her he had received minute directions. Occasionally he struck a match, and presently in the fitful glare of one of these he and those directly behind him saw the foot of a ladder that disappeared in the Stygian darkness above.

"Follow me up this, very quietly," he said to those behind him. "Up to the third landing."

They did as he bid them. At the third landing Barney felt for the latch he knew was there--he was on familiar ground now. Finding it he pushed open the door it held in place, and through a tiny crack surveyed the room beyond. It was vacant. The American threw the door wide and stepped within. Directly behind him was Butzow, his eyes wide in wonderment. After him filed the troopers until seventeen of them stood behind their lieutenant and the "king."

Through the window overlooking the courtyard came a piteous wailing. Barney ran to the casement and looked out. Butzow was at his side.

"Himmel!" ejaculated the Luthanian. "They are about to shoot him. Quick, your majesty," and without waiting to see if he were followed the lieutenant raced for the door of the apartment. Close behind him came the American and the seventeen.

It took but a moment to reach the stairway down which the rescuers tumbled pell-mell.

Maenck was giving his commands to the firing squad with fiendish deliberation and delay. He seemed to enjoy dragging out the agony that the condemned man suffered. But it was this very cruelty that caused Maenck's undoing and saved the life of Leopold of Lutha. Just before he gave the word to fire Maenck paused and laughed aloud at the pitiable figure trembling and whining against the stone wall before him, and during that pause a commotion arose at the tower doorway behind the firing squad.

Maenck turned to discover the cause of the interruption, and as he turned he saw the figure of the king leaping toward him with leveled revolver. At the king's back a company of troopers of the Royal Horse Guard was pouring into the courtyard.

Maenck snatched his own revolver from his hip and fired point-blank at the "king." The firing squad had turned at the sound of assault from the rear. Some of them discharged their pieces at the advancing troopers. Butzow gave a command and seventeen carbines poured their deadly hail into the ranks of the Blentz retainers. At Maenck's shot the "king" staggered and fell to the pavement.

Maenck leaped across his prostrate form, yelling to his men "Shoot the American." Then he was lost to Barney's sight in the hand-to-hand scrimmage that was taking place. The American tried to regain his feet, but the shock of the wound in his breast had apparently paralyzed him for the moment. A Blentz

soldier was running toward the prisoner standing open-mouthed against the wall. The fellow's rifle was raised to his hip--his intention was only too obvious.

Barney drew himself painfully and slowly to one elbow. The man was rapidly nearing the true Leopold. In another moment he would shoot. The American raised his revolver and, taking careful aim, fired. The soldier shrieked, covered his face with his hands, spun around once, and dropped at the king's feet.

The troopers under Butzow were forcing the men of Blentz toward the far end of the courtyard. Two of the Blentz faction were standing a little apart, backing slowly away and at the same time deliberately firing at the king. Barney seemed the only one who noticed them. Once again he raised his revolver and fired. One of the men sat down suddenly, looked vacantly about him, and then rolled over upon his side. The other fired once more at the king and the same instant Barney fired at the soldier. Soldier and king--would-be assassin and his victim--fell simultaneously. Barney grimaced. The wound in his breast was painful. He had done his best to save the king. It was no fault of his that he had failed. It was a long way to Beatrice. He wondered if Emma von der Tann would be on the station platform, awaiting him--then he swooned.

Butzow and his seventeen had it all their own way in the courtyard and castle of Blentz. After the first resistance the soldiery of Peter fled to the guardroom. Butzow followed them, and there they laid down their arms. Then the lieutenant returned to the courtyard to look for the king and Barney Custer. He found them both, and both were wounded. He had them carried to the royal apartments in the north tower. When Barney regained consciousness he found the scowling portrait of the Blentz princess frowning down upon him. He lay upon a great bed where the soldiers, thinking him king, had placed him. Opposite him, against the farther wall, the real king lay upon a cot. Butzow was working over him.

"Not so bad, after all, Barney," the lieutenant was saying. "Only a flesh wound in the calf of the leg."

The king made no reply. He was afraid to declare his identity. First he must learn the intentions of the impostor. He only closed his eyes wearily. Presently he asked a question.

"Is he badly wounded?" and he indicated the figure upon the great bed.

Butzow turned and crossed to where the American lay. He saw that the latter's eyes were open and that he was conscious.

"How does your majesty feel?" he asked. There was more respect in his tone than ever before. One of the Blentz soldiers had told him how the "king," after being

wounded by Maenck, had raised himself upon his elbow and saved the prisoner's life by shooting three of his assailants.

"I thought I was done for," answered Barney Custer, "but I rather guess the bullet struck only a glancing blow. It couldn't have entered my lungs, for I neither cough nor spit blood. To tell you the truth, I feel surprisingly fit. How's the prisoner?"

"Only a flesh wound in the calf of his left leg, sire," replied Butzow.

"I am glad," was Barney's only comment. He didn't want to be king of Lutha; but he had foreseen that with the death of the king his imposture might be forced upon him for life.

After Butzow and one of the troopers had washed and dressed the wounds of both men Barney asked them to leave the room.

"I wish to sleep," he said. "If I require you I will ring."

Saluting, the two backed from the apartment. Just as they were passing through the doorway the American called out to Butzow.

"You have Peter of Blentz and Maenck in custody?" he asked.

"I regret having to report to your majesty," replied the officer, "that both must have escaped. A thorough search of the entire castle has failed to reveal them."

Barney scowled. He had hoped to place these two conspirators once and for all where they would never again threaten the peace of the throne of Lutha--in hell. For a moment he lay in thought. Then he addressed the officer again.

"Leave your force here," he said, "to guard us. Ride, yourself, to Lustadt and inform Prince von der Tann that it is the king's desire that every effort be made to capture these two men. Have them brought to Lustadt immediately they are apprehended. Bring them dead or alive."

Again Butzow saluted and prepared to leave the room.

"Wait," said Barney. "Convey our greetings to the Princess von der Tann, and inform her that my wound is of small importance, as is also that of the--Mr. Custer. You may go, lieutenant."

When they were alone Barney turned toward the king. The other lay upon his side glaring at the American. When he caught the latter's eyes upon him he spoke.

"What do you intend doing with me?" he said. "Are you going to keep your word and return my identity?"

"I have promised," replied Barney, "and what I promise I always perform."

"Then exchange clothing with me at once," cried the king, half rising from his cot.

"Not so fast, my friend," rejoined the American. "There are a few trifling details to be arranged before we resume our proper personalities."

"Do you realize that you should be hanged for what you have done?" snarled the king. "You assaulted me, stole my clothing, left me here to be shot by Peter, and sat upon my throne in Lustadt while I lay a prisoner condemned to death."

"And do you realize," replied Barney, "that by so doing I saved your foolish little throne for you; that I drove the invaders from your dominions; that I have unmasked your enemies, and that I have once again proven to you that the Prince von der Tann is your best friend and most loyal supporter?"

"You laid your plebeian hands upon me," cried the king, raising his voice. "You humiliated me, and you shall suffer for it."

Barney Custer eyed the king for a long moment before he spoke again. It was difficult to believe that the man was so devoid of gratitude, and so blind as not to see that even the rough treatment that he had received at the American's hands was as nothing by comparison with the service that the American had done him. Apparently Leopold had already forgotten that three times Barney Custer had saved his life in the courtyard below. From the man's demeanor, now that his life was no longer at stake, Barney caught an inkling of what his attitude might be when once again he was returned to the despotic power of his kingship.

"It is futile to reason with you," he said. "There is only one way to handle such as you. At present I hold the power to coerce you, and I shall continue to hold that power until I am safely out of your two-by-four kingdom. If you do as I say you shall have your throne back again. If you refuse, why by Heaven you shall never have it. I'll stay king of Lutha myself."

"What are your terms?" asked the king.

"That Prince Peter of Blentz, Captain Ernst Maenck, and old Von Coblich be tried, convicted, and hanged for high treason," replied the American.

"That is easy," said the king. "I should do so anyway immediately I resumed my throne. Now get up and give me my clothes. Take this cot and I will take the bed. None will know of the exchange."

"Again you are too fast," answered Barney. "There is another condition."

"Well?"

"You must promise upon your royal honor that Ludwig, Prince von der Tann, remain chancellor of Lutha during your life or his."

"Very well," assented the king. "I promise," and again he half rose from his cot.

"Hold on a minute," admonished the American; "there is yet one more condition of which I have not made mention."

"What, another?" exclaimed Leopold testily. "How much do you want for returning to me what you have stolen?"

"So far I have asked for nothing for myself," replied Barney. "Now I am coming to that part of the agreement. The Princess Emma von der Tann is betrothed to you. She does not love you. She has honored me with her affection, but she will not wed until she has been formally released from her promise to wed Leopold of Lutha. The king must sign such a release and also a sanction of her marriage to Barney Custer, of Beatrice. Do you understand what I want?"

The king went livid. He came to his feet beside the cot. For the moment, his wound was forgotten. He tottered toward the impostor.

"You scoundrel!" he screamed. "You scoundrel! You have stolen my identity and my throne and now you wish to steal the woman who loves me."

"Don't get excited, Leo," warned the American, "and don't talk so loud. The Princess doesn't love you, and you know it as well as I. She will never marry you. If you want your dinky throne back you'll have to do as I desire; that is, sign the release and the sanction.

"Now let's don't have any heroics about it. You have the proposition. Now I am going to sleep. In the meantime you may think it over. If the papers are not ready when it comes time for us to leave, and from the way I feel now I rather think I shall be ready to mount a horse by morning, I shall ride back to Lustadt as king of Lutha, and I shall marry her highness into the bargain, and you may go hang!

"How the devil you will earn a living with that king job taken away from you I don't know. You're a long way from New York, and in the present state of carnage in Europe I rather doubt that there are many headwaiters jobs open this side of the American metropolis, and I can't for the moment think of anything else at which you would shine--with all due respect to some excellent headwaiters I have known."

For some time the king remained silent. He was thinking. He realized that it lay in the power of the American to do precisely what he had threatened to do. No

one would doubt his identity. Even Peter of Blentz had not recognized the real king despite Leopold's repeated and hysterical claims.

Lieutenant Butzow, the American's best friend, had no more suspected the exchange of identities. Von der Tann, too, must have been deceived. Everyone had been deceived. There was no hope that the people, who really saw so little of their king, would guess the deception that was being played upon them. Leopold groaned. Barney opened his eyes and turned toward him.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"I will sign the release and the sanction of her highness' marriage to you," said the king.

"Good!" exclaimed the American. "You will then go at once to Brosnov as originally planned. I will return to Lustadt and get her highness, and we will immediately leave Lutha via Brosnov. There you and I will effect a change of raiment, and you will ride back to Lustadt with the small guard that accompanies her highness and me to the frontier."

"Why do you not remain in Lustadt?" asked the king. "You could as well be married there as elsewhere."

"Because I don't trust your majesty," replied the American. "It must be done precisely as I say or not at all. Are you agreeable?"

The king assented with a grumpy nod.

"Then get up and write as I dictate," said Barney. Leopold of Lutha did as he was bid. The result was two short, crisply worded documents. At the bottom of each was the signature of Leopold of Lutha. Barney took the two papers and carefully tucked them beneath his pillow.

"Now let's sleep," he said. "It is getting late and we both need the rest. In the morning we have long rides ahead of us. Good night."

The king did not respond. In a short time Barney was fast asleep. The light still burned.