

Chapter XIV - "THE KING'S WILL IS LAW"

The Blentz princess frowned down upon the king and impostor impartially from her great gilt frame. It must have been close to midnight that the painting moved--just a fraction of an inch. Then it remained motionless for a time. Again it moved. This time it revealed a narrow crack at its edge. In the crack an eye shone.

One of the sleepers moved. He opened his eyes. Stealthily he raised himself on his elbow and gazed at the other across the apartment. He listened intently. The regular breathing of the sleeper proclaimed the soundness of his slumber. Gingerly the man placed one foot upon the floor. The eye glued to the crack at the edge of the great, gilt frame of the Blentz princess remained fastened upon him. He let his other foot slip to the floor beside the first. Carefully he raised himself until he stood erect upon the floor. Then, on tiptoe he started across the room.

The eye in the dark followed him. The man reached the side of the sleeper. Bending over he listened intently to the other's breathing. Satisfied that slumber was profound he stepped quickly to a wardrobe in which a soldier had hung the clothing of both the king and the American. He took down the uniform of the former, casting from time to time apprehensive glances toward the sleeper. The latter did not stir, and the other passed to the little dressing-room adjoining.

A few minutes later he reentered the apartment fully clothed and wearing the accouterments of Leopold of Lutha. In his hand was a drawn sword. Silently and swiftly he crossed to the side of the sleeping man. The eye at the crack beside the gilded frame pressed closer to the aperture. The sword was raised above the body of the slumberer--its point hovered above his heart. The face of the man who wielded it was hard with firm resolve.

His muscles tensed to drive home the blade, but something held his hand. His face paled. His shoulders contracted with a little shudder, and he turned toward the door of the apartment, almost running across the floor in his anxiety to escape. The eye in the dark maintained its unblinking vigilance.

With his hand upon the knob a sudden thought stayed the fugitive's flight. He glanced quickly back at the sleeper--he had not moved. Then the man who wore the uniform of the king of Lutha recrossed the apartment to the bed, reached beneath one of the pillows and withdrew two neatly folded official-looking documents. These he placed in the breastpocket of his uniform. A moment later he was walking down the spiral stairway to the main floor of the castle.

In the guardroom the troopers of the Royal Horse who were not on guard were stretched in slumber. Only a corporal remained awake. As the man entered the guardroom the corporal glanced up, and as his eyes fell upon the newcomer, he sprang to his feet, saluting.

"Turn out the guard!" he cried. "Turn out the guard for his majesty, the king!"

The sleeping soldiers, but half awake, scrambled to their feet, their muscles reacting to the command that their brains but half perceived. They snatched their guns from the racks and formed a line behind the corporal. The king raised his fingers to the vizer of his helmet in acknowledgment of their salute.

"Saddle up quietly, corporal," he said. "We shall ride to Lustadt tonight."

The non-commissioned officer saluted. "And an extra horse for Herr Custer?" he said.

The king shook his head. "The man died of his wound about an hour ago," he said. "While you are saddling up I shall arrange with some of the Blentz servants for his burial--now hurry!"

The corporal marched his troopers from the guardroom toward the stables. The man in the king's clothes touched a bell which was obviously a servant call. He waited impatiently a reply to his summons, tapping his finger-tips against the sword-scabbard that was belted to his side. At last a sleepy-eyed man responded--a man who had grown gray in the service of Peter of Blentz. At sight of the king he opened his eyes in astonishment, pulled his foretop, and bowed uneasily.

"Come closer," whispered the king. The man did so, and the king spoke in his ear earnestly, but in scarce audible tones. The eyes of the listener narrowed to mere slits--of avarice and cunning, cruelly cold and calculating. The speaker searched through the pockets of the king's clothes that covered him. At last he withdrew a roll of bills. The amount must have been a large one, but he did not stop to count it. He held the money under the eyes of the servant. The fellow's claw-like fingers reached for the tempting wealth. He nodded his head affirmatively.

"You may trust me, sire," he whispered.

The king slipped the money into the other's palm. "And as much more," he said, "when I receive proof that my wishes have been fulfilled."

"Thank you, sire," said the servant.

The king looked steadily into the other's face before he spoke again.

"And if you fail me," he said, "may God have mercy on your soul." Then he wheeled and left the guardroom, walking out into the courtyard where the soldiers were busy saddling their mounts.

A few minutes later the party clattered over the drawbridge and down the road toward Blentz and Lustadt. From a window of the apartments of Peter of Blentz a man watched them depart. When they passed across a strip of moonlit road, and he had counted them, he smiled with relief.

A moment later he entered a panel beside the huge fireplace in the west wall and disappeared. There he struck a match, found a candle and lighted it. Walking a few steps he came to a figure sleeping upon a pile of clothing. He stooped and shook the sleeper by the shoulder.

"Wake up!" he cried in a subdued voice. "Wake up, Prince Peter; I have good news for you."

The other opened his eyes, stretched, and at last sat up.

"What is it, Maenck?" he asked querulously.

"Great news, my prince," replied the other.

"While you have been sleeping many things have transpired within the walls of your castle. The king's troopers have departed; but that is a small matter compared with the other. Here, behind the portrait of your great-grandmother, I have listened and watched all night. I opened the secret door a fraction of an inch--just enough to permit me to look into the apartment where the king and the American lay wounded. They had been talking as I opened the door, but after that they ceased--the king falling asleep at once--the American feigning slumber. For a long time I watched, but nothing happened until near midnight. Then the American arose and donned the king's clothes.

"He approached Leopold with drawn sword, but when he would have thrust it through the heart of the sleeping man his nerve failed him. Then he stole some papers from the room and left. Just now he has ridden out toward Lustadt with the men of the Royal Horse who captured the castle yesterday."

Before Maenck was half-way through his narrative, Peter of Blentz was wide awake and all attention. His eyes glowed with suddenly aroused interest.

"Somewhere in this, prince," concluded Maenck, "there must lie the seed of fortune for you and me."

Peter nodded. "Yes," he mused, "there must."

For a time both men were buried in thought. Suddenly Maenck snapped his fingers. "I have it!" he cried. He bent toward Prince Peter's ear and whispered his plan. When he was done the Blentz prince grasped his hand.

"Just the thing, Maenck!" he cried. "Just the thing. Leopold will never again listen to idle gossip directed against our loyalty. If I know him--and who should know him better--he will heap honors upon you, my Maenck; and as for me, he will at least forgive me and take me back into his confidence. Lose no time now, my friend. We are free now to go and come, since the king's soldiers have been withdrawn."

In the garden back of the castle an old man was busy digging a hole. It was a long, narrow hole, and, when it was completed, nearly four feet deep. It looked like a grave. When he had finished the old man hobbled to a shed that leaned against the south wall. Here were boards, tools, and a bench. It was the castle workshop. The old man selected a number of rough pine boards. These he measured and sawed, fitted and nailed, working all the balance of the night. By dawn, he had a long, narrow box, just a trifle smaller than the hole he had dug in the garden. The box resembled a crude coffin. When it was quite finished, including a cover, he dragged it out into the garden and set it upon two boards that spanned the hole, so that it rested precisely over the excavation.

All these precautions methodically made, he returned to the castle. In a little storeroom he searched for and found an ax. With his thumb he felt of the edge--for an ax it was marvelously sharp. The old fellow grinned and shook his head, as one who appreciates in anticipation the consummation of a good joke. Then he crept noiselessly through the castle's corridors and up the spiral stairway in the north tower. In one hand was the sharp ax.

The moment Lieutenant Butzow had reached Lustadt he had gone directly to Prince von der Tann; but the moment his message had been delivered to the chancellor he sought out the chancellor's daughter, to tell her all that had occurred at Blentz.

"I saw but little of Mr. Custer," he said. "He was very quiet. I think all that he has been through has unnerved him. He was slightly wounded in the left leg. The king was wounded in the breast. His majesty conducted himself in a most valiant and generous manner. Wounded, he lay upon his stomach in the courtyard of the castle and defended Mr. Custer, who was, of course, unarmed. The king shot three of Prince Peter's soldiers who were attempting to assassinate Mr. Custer."

Emma von der Tann smiled. It was evident that Lieutenant Butzow had not discovered the deception that had been practiced upon him in common with all

Lutha--she being the only exception. It seemed incredible that this good friend of the American had not seen in the heroism of the man who wore the king's clothes the attributes and ear-marks of Barney Custer. She glowed with pride at the narration of his heroism, though she suffered with him because of his wound.

It was not yet noon when the detachment of the Royal Horse arrived in Lustadt from Blentz. At their head rode one whom all upon the streets of the capital greeted enthusiastically as king. The party rode directly to the royal palace, and the king retired immediately to his apartments. A half hour later an officer of the king's household knocked upon the door of the Princess Emma von der Tann's boudoir. In accord with her summons he entered, saluted respectfully, and handed her a note.

It was written upon the personal stationary of Leopold of Lutha. The girl read and reread it. For some time she could not seem to grasp the enormity of the thing that had overwhelmed her--the daring of the action that the message explained. The note was short and to the point, and was signed only with initials.

DEAREST EMMA:

The king died of his wounds just before midnight. I shall keep the throne. There is no other way. None knows and none must ever know the truth. Your father alone may suspect; but if we are married at once our alliance will cement him and his faction to us. Send word by the bearer that you agree with the wisdom of my plan, and that we may be wed at once--this afternoon, in fact.

The people may wonder for a few days at the strange haste, but my answer shall be that I am going to the front with my troops. The son and many of the high officials of the Kaiser have already established the precedent, marrying hurriedly upon the eve of their departure for the front.

With every assurance of my undying love, believe me,

Yours, B. C.

The girl walked slowly across the room to her writing table. The officer stood in respectful silence awaiting the answer that the king had told him to bring. The princess sat down before the carved bit of furniture. Mechanically she drew a piece of note paper from a drawer. Many times she dipped her pen in the ink before she could determine what reply to send. Ages of ingrained royalistic principles were shocked and shattered by the enormity of the thing the man she loved had asked of her, and yet cold reason told her that it was the only way.

Lutha would be lost should the truth be known--that the king was dead, for there was no heir of closer blood connection with the royal house than Prince Peter of Blentz, whose great-grandmother had been a Rubinroth princess. Slowly, at last, she wrote as follows:

SIRE:

The king's will is law.

EMMA

That was all. Placing the note in an envelope she sealed it and handed it to the officer, who bowed and left the room.

A half hour later officers of the Royal Horse were riding through the streets of Lustadt. Some announced to the people upon the streets the coming marriage of the king and princess. Others rode to the houses of the nobility with the king's command that they be present at the ceremony in the old cathedral at four o'clock that afternoon.

Never had there been such bustling about the royal palace or in the palaces of the nobles of Lutha. The buzz and hum of excited conversation filled the whole town. That the choice of the king met the approval of his subjects was more than evident. Upon every lip was praise and love of the Princess Emma von der Tann. The future of Lutha seemed assured with a king who could fight joined in marriage to a daughter of the warrior line of Von der Tann.

The princess was busy up to the last minute. She had not seen her future husband since his return from Blentz, for he, too, had been busy. Twice he had sent word to her, but on both occasions had regretted that he could not come personally because of the pressure of state matters and the preparations for the ceremony that was to take place in the cathedral in so short a time.

At last the hour arrived. The cathedral was filled to overflowing. After the custom of Lutha, the bride had walked alone up the broad center aisle to the foot of the chancel. Guardsmen lining the way on either hand stood rigidly at salute until she stopped at the end of the soft, rose-strewn carpet and turned to await the coming of the king.

Presently the doors at the opposite end of the cathedral opened. There was a fanfare of trumpets, and up the center aisle toward the waiting girl walked the royal groom. It seemed ages to the princess since she had seen her lover. Her eyes

devoured him as he approached her. She noticed that he limped, and wondered; but for a moment the fact carried no special suggestion to her brain.

The people had risen as the king entered. Again, the pieces of the guardsmen had snapped to present; but silence, intense and utter, reigned over the vast assembly. The only movement was the measured stride of the king as he advanced to claim his bride.

At the head of each line of guardsmen, nearest the chancel and upon either side of the bridal party, the ranks were formed of commissioned officers. Butzow was among them. He, too, out of the corner of his eye watched the advancing figure. Suddenly he noted the limp, and gave a little involuntary gasp. He looked at the Princess Emma, and saw her eyes suddenly widen with consternation.

Slowly at first, and then in a sudden tidal wave of memory, Butzow's story of the fight in the courtyard at Blentz came back to her.

"I saw but little of Mr. Custer," he had said. "He was slightly wounded in the left leg. The king was wounded in the breast." But Lieutenant Butzow had not known the true identity of either.

The real Leopold it was who had been wounded in the left leg, and the man who was approaching her up the broad cathedral aisle was limping noticeably--and favoring his left leg. The man to whom she was to be married was not Barney Custer--he was Leopold of Lutha!

A hundred mad schemes rioted through her brain. The wedding must not go on! But how was she to avert it? The king was within a few paces of her now. There was a smile upon his lips, and in that smile she saw the final confirmation of her fears. When Leopold of Lutha smiled his upper lip curved just a trifle into a shadow of a sneer. It was a trivial characteristic that Barney Custer did not share in common with the king.

Half mad with terror, the girl seized upon the only subterfuge which seemed at all likely to succeed. It would, at least, give her a slight reprieve--a little time in which to think, and possibly find an avenue from her predicament.

She staggered forward a step, clapped her two hands above her heart, and reeled as though to fall. Butzow, who had been watching her narrowly, sprang forward and caught her in his arms, where she lay limp with closed eyes as though in a dead faint. The king ran forward. The people craned their necks. A sudden burst of exclamations rose throughout the cathedral, and then Lieutenant Butzow, shouldering his way past the chancel, carried the Princess Emma to a little

anteroom off the east transept. Behind him walked the king, the bishop, and Prince Ludwig.