

## **Chapter XV - MAENCK BLUNDERS**

After a hurried breakfast Peter of Blentz and Captain Ernst Maenck left the castle of Blentz. Prince Peter rode north toward the frontier, Austria, and safety, Captain Maenck rode south toward Lustadt. Neither knew that general orders had been issued to soldiery and gendarmerie of Lutha to capture them dead or alive. So Prince Peter rode carelessly; but Captain Maenck, because of the nature of his business and the proximity of enemies about Lustadt, proceeded with circumspection.

Prince Peter was arrested at Tafelberg, and, though he stormed and raged and threatened, he was immediately packed off under heavy guard back toward Lustadt.

Captain Ernst Maenck was more fortunate. He reached the capital of Lutha in safety, though he had to hide on several occasions from detachments of troops moving toward the north. Once within the city he rode rapidly to the house of a friend. Here he learned that which set him into a fine state of excitement and profanity. The king and the Princess Emma von der Tann were to be wed that very afternoon! It lacked but half an hour to four o'clock.

Maenck grabbed his cap and dashed from the house before his astonished friend could ask a single question. He hurried straight toward the cathedral. The king had just arrived, and entered when Maenck came up, breathless. The guard at the doorway did not recognize him. If they had they would have arrested him. Instead they contented themselves with refusing him admission, and when he insisted they threatened him with arrest.

To be arrested now would be to ruin his fine plan, so he turned and walked away. At the first cross street he turned up the side of the cathedral. The grounds were walled up on this side, and he sought in vain for entrance. At the rear he discovered a limousine standing in the alley where its chauffeur had left it after depositing his passengers at the front door of the cathedral. The top of the limousine was but a foot or two below the top of the wall.

Maenck clambered to the hood of the machine, and from there to the top. A moment later he dropped to the earth inside the cathedral grounds. Before him were many windows. Most of them were too high for him to reach, and the others that he tried at first were securely fastened. Passing around the end of the building, he at last discovered one that was open--it led into the east transept.

Maenck crawled through. He was within the building that held the man he sought. He found himself in a small room--evidently a dressing-room. There were two doors leading from it. He approached one and listened. He heard the tones of subdued conversation beyond.

Very cautiously he opened the door a crack. He could not believe the good fortune that was revealed before him. On a couch lay the Princess Emma von der Tann. Beside her her father. At the door was Lieutenant Butzow. The bishop and a doctor were talking at the head of the couch. Pacing up and down the room, resplendent in the marriage robes of a king of Lutha, was the man he sought.

Maenck drew his revolver. He broke the barrel, and saw that there was a good cartridge in each chamber of the cylinder. He closed it quietly. Then he threw open the door, stepped into the room, took deliberate aim, and fired.

The old man with the ax moved cautiously along the corridor upon the second floor of the Castle of Blentz until he came to a certain door. Gently he turned the knob and pushed the door inward. Holding the ax behind his back, he entered. In his pocket was a great roll of money, and there was to be an equal amount waiting him at Lustadt when his mission had been fulfilled.

Once within the room, he looked quickly about him. Upon a great bed lay the figure of a man asleep. His face was turned toward the opposite wall away from the side of the bed nearer the menacing figure of the old servant. On tiptoe the man with the ax approached. The neck of his victim lay uncovered before him. He swung the ax behind him. A single blow, as mighty as his ancient muscles could deliver, would suffice.

Barney Custer opened his eyes. Directly opposite him upon the wall was a dark-toned photogravure of a hunting scene. It tilted slightly forward upon its wire support. As Barney's opened it chanced that they were directed straight upon the shiny glass of the picture. The light from the window struck the glass in such a way as to transform it into a mirror. The American's eyes were glued with horror upon the reflection that he saw there--an old man swinging a huge ax down upon his head.

It is an open question as to which of the two was the most surprised at the cat-like swiftness of the movement that carried Barney Custer out of that bed and landed him in temporary safety upon the opposite side.

With a snarl the old man ran around the foot of the bed to corner his prey between the bed and the wall. He was swinging the ax as though to hurl it. So close was he that Barney guessed it would be difficult for him to miss his mark. The least he could expect would be a frightful wound. To have attempted to

escape would have necessitated turning his back to his adversary, inviting instant death. To grapple with a man thus armed appeared an equally hopeless alternative.

Shoulder-high beside him hung the photogravure that had already saved his life once. Why not again? He snatched it from its hangings, lifted it above his head in both hands, and hurled it at the head of the old man. The glass shattered full upon the ancient's crown, the man's head went through the picture, and the frame settled over his shoulders. At the same instant Barney Custer leaped across the bed, seized a light chair, and turned to face his foe upon more even turns.

The old man did not pause to remove the frame from about his neck. Blood trickled down his forehead and cheeks from deep gashes that the broken glass had made. Now he was in a berserker rage.

As he charged again he uttered a peculiar whistling noise from between his set teeth. To the American it sounded like the hissing of a snake, and as he would have met a snake he met the venomous attack of the old man.

When the short battle was over the Blentz servitor lay unconscious upon the floor, while above him leaned the American, uninjured, ripping long strips from a sheet torn from the bed, twisting them into rope-like strands and, with them, binding the wrists and ankles of his defeated foe. Finally he stuffed a gag between the toothless gums.

Running to the wardrobe, he discovered that the king's uniform was gone. That, with the witness of the empty bed, told him the whole story. The American smiled. "More nerve than I gave him credit for," he mused, as he walked back to his bed and reached under the pillow for the two papers he had forced the king to sign. They, too, were gone. Slowly Barney Custer realized his plight, as there filtered through his mind a suggestion of the possibilities of the trick that had been played upon him.

Why should Leopold wish these papers? Of course, he might merely have taken them that he might destroy them; but something told Barney Custer that such was not the case. And something, too, told him whither the king had ridden and what he would do there when he arrived.

He ran back to the wardrobe. In it hung the peasant attire that he had stolen from the line of the careless house frau, and later wished upon his majesty the king. Barney grinned as he recalled the royal disgust with which Leopold had fingered the soiled garments. He scarce blamed him. Looking further toward the back of the wardrobe, the American discovered other clothing.

He dragged it all out upon the floor. There was an old shooting jacket, several pairs of trousers and breeches, and a hunting coat. In a drawer at the bottom of the wardrobe he found many old shoes, puttees, and boots.

From this miscellany he selected riding breeches, a pair of boots, and the red hunting coat as the only articles that fitted his rather large frame. Hastily he dressed, and, taking the ax the old man had brought to the room as the only weapon available, he walked boldly into the corridor, down the spiral stairway and into the guardroom.

Barney Custer was prepared to fight. He was desperate. He could have slunk from the Castle of Blentz as he had entered it--through the secret passageway to the ravine; but to attempt to reach Lustadt on foot was not at all compatible with the urgent haste that he felt necessary. He must have a horse, and a horse he would have if he had to fight his way through a Blentz army.

But there were no armed retainers left at Blentz. The guardroom was vacant; but there were arms there and ammunition. Barney commandeered a sword and a revolver, then he walked into the courtyard and crossed to the stables. The way took him by the garden. In it he saw a coffin-like box resting upon planks above a grave-like excavation. Barney investigated. The box was empty. Once again he grinned. "It is not always wise," he mused, "to count your corpses before they're dead. What a lot of work the old man might have spared himself if he'd only caught his cadaver first--or at least tried to."

Passing on by his own grave, he came to the stables. A groom was currying a strong, clean-limbed hunter haltered in the doorway. The man looked up as Barney approached him. A puzzled expression entered the fellow's eyes. He was a young man--a stupid-looking lout. It was evident that he half recognized the face of the newcomer as one he had seen before. Barney nodded to him.

"Never mind finishing," he said. "I am in a hurry. You may saddle him at once." The voice was authoritative--it brooked no demur. The groom touched his forehead, dropped the currycomb and brush, and turned back into the stable to fetch saddle and bridle.

Five minutes later Barney was riding toward the gate. The portcullis was raised--the drawbridge spanned the moat--no guard was there to bar his way. The sunlight flooded the green valley, stretching lazily below him in the soft warmth of a mellow autumn morning. Behind him he had left the brooding shadows of the grim old fortress--the cold, cruel, depressing stronghold of intrigue, treason, and sudden death.

He threw back his shoulders and filled his lungs with the sweet, pure air of freedom. He was a new man. The wound in his breast was forgotten. Lightly he touched his spurs to the hunter's sides. Tossing his head and curveting, the animal broke into a long, easy trot. Where the road dipped into the ravine and down through the village to the valley the rider drew his restless mount into a walk; but, once in the valley, he let him out. Barney took the short road to Lustadt. It would cut ten miles off the distance that the main wagonroad covered, and it was a good road for a horseman. It should bring him to Lustadt by one o'clock or a little after. The road wound through the hills to the east of the main highway, and was scarcely more than a trail where it crossed the Ru River upon a narrow bridge that spanned the deep mountain gorge that walls the Ru for ten miles through the hills.

When Barney reached the river his hopes sank. The bridge was gone--dynamited by the Austrians in their retreat. The nearest bridge was at the crossing of the main highway over ten miles to the southwest. There, too, the river might be forded even if the Austrians had destroyed that bridge also; but here or elsewhere in the hills there could be no fording--the banks of the Ru were perpendicular cliffs.

The misfortune would add nearly twenty miles to his journey--he could not now hope to reach Lustadt before late in the afternoon. Turning his horse back along the trail he had come, he retraced his way until he reached a narrow bridle path that led toward the southwest. The trail was rough and indistinct, yet he pushed forward, even more rapidly than safety might have suggested. The noble beast beneath him was all loyalty and ambition.

"Take it easy, old boy," whispered Barney into the slim, pointed ears that moved ceaselessly backward and forward, "you'll get your chance when we strike the highway, never fear."

And he did.

So unexpected had been Maenck's entrance into the room in the east transept, so sudden his attack, that it was all over before a hand could be raised to stay him. At the report of his revolver the king sank to the floor. At almost the same instant Lieutenant Butzow whipped a revolver from beneath his tunic and fired at the assassin. Maenck staggered forward and stumbled across the body of the king. Butzow was upon him instantly, wresting the revolver from his fingers. Prince Ludwig ran to the king's side and, kneeling there, raised Leopold's head in his arms. The bishop and the doctor bent over the limp form. The Princess Emma stood a little apart. She had leaped from the couch where she had been lying. Her eyes were wide in horror. Her palms pressed to her cheeks.

It was upon this scene that a hatless, dust-covered man in a red hunting coat burst through the door that had admitted Maenck. The man had seen and recognized the conspirator as he climbed to the top of the limousine and dropped within the cathedral grounds, and he had followed close upon his heels.

No one seemed to note his entrance. All ears were turned toward the doctor, who was speaking.

"The king is dead," he said.

Maenck raised himself upon an elbow. He spoke feebly.

"You fools," he cried. "That man was not the king. I saw him steal the king's clothes at Blentz and I followed him here. He is the American--the impostor." Then his eyes, circling the faces about him to note the results of his announcements, fell upon the face of the man in the red hunting coat. Amazement and wonder were in his face. Slowly he raised his finger and pointed.

"There is the king," he said.

Every eye turned in the direction he indicated. Exclamations of surprise and incredulity burst from every lip. The old chancellor looked from the man in the red hunting coat to the still form of the man upon the floor in the blood-spattered marriage garments of a king of Lutha. He let the king's head gently down upon the carpet, and then he rose to his feet and faced the man in the red hunting coat.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

Before Barney could speak Lieutenant Butzow spoke.

"He is the king, your highness," he said. "I rode with him to Blentz to free Mr. Custer. Both were wounded in the courtyard in the fight that took place there. I helped to dress their wounds. The king was wounded in the breast--Mr. Custer in the left leg."

Prince von der Tann looked puzzled. Again he turned his eyes questioningly toward the newcomer.

"Is this the truth?" he asked.

Barney looked toward the Princess Emma. In her eyes he could read the relief that the sight of him alive had brought her. Since she had recognized the king she had believed that Barney was dead. The temptation was great--he dreaded losing her, and he feared he would lose her when her father learned the truth of

the deception that had been practiced upon him. He might lose even more--men had lost their heads for tampering with the affairs of kings.

"Well?" persisted the chancellor.

"Lieutenant Butzow is partially correct--he honestly believes that he is entirely so," replied the American. "He did ride with me from Lustadt to Blentz to save the man who lies dead here at your feet. The lieutenant thought that he was riding with his king, just as your highness thought that he was riding with his king during the battle of Lustadt. You were both wrong--you were riding with Mr. Bernard Custer, of Beatrice. I am he. I have no apologies to make. What I did I would do again. I did it for Lutha and for the woman I love. She knows and the king knew that I intended restoring his identity to him with no one the wiser for the interchange that had taken place. The king upset my plans by stealing back his identity while I slept, with the result that you see before you upon the floor. He has died as he had lived--futilely."

As he spoke the Princess Emma had crossed the room toward him. Now she stood at his side, her hand in his. Tense silence reigned in the apartment. The old chancellor stood with bowed head, buried in thought. All eyes were upon him except those of the doctor, who had turned his attention from the dead king to the wounded assassin. Butzow stood looking at Barney Custer in open relief and admiration. He had been trying to vindicate his friend in his own mind ever since he had discovered, as he believed, that Barney had tricked Leopold after the latter had saved his life at Blentz and ridden to Lustadt in the king's guise. Now that he knew the whole truth he realized how stupid he had been not to guess that the man who had led the victorious Luthanian army before Lustadt could not have been the cowardly Leopold.

Presently the chancellor broke the silence.

"You say that Leopold of Lutha lived futilely. You are right; but when you say that he has died futilely, you are, I believe, wrong. Living, he gave us a poor weakling. Dying, he leaves the throne to a brave man, in whose veins flows the blood of the Rubinroths, hereditary rulers of Lutha.

"You are the only rightful successor to the throne of Lutha," he argued, "other than Peter of Blentz. Your mother's marriage to a foreigner did not bar the succession of her offspring. Aside from the fact that Peter of Blentz is out of the question, is the more important fact that your line is closer to the throne than his. He knew it, and this knowledge was the real basis of his hatred of you."

As the old chancellor ceased speaking he drew his sword and raised it on high above his head.

"The king is dead," he said. "Long live the king!"



XVI

KING OF LUTHA

Barney Custer, of Beatrice, had no desire to be king of Lutha. He lost no time in saying so. All that he wanted of Lutha was the girl he had found there, as his father before him had found the girl of his choice. Von der Tann pleaded with him.

"Twice have I fought under you, sire," he urged. "Twice, and only twice since the old king died, have I felt that the future of Lutha was safe in the hands of her ruler, and both these times it was you who sat upon the throne. Do not desert us now. Let me live to see Lutha once more happy, with a true Rubinroth upon the throne and my daughter at his side."

Butzow added his pleas to those of the old chancellor. The American hesitated.

"Let us leave it to the representatives of the people and to the house of nobles," he suggested.

The chancellor of Lutha explained the situation to both houses. Their reply was unanimous. He carried it to the American, who awaited the decision of Lutha in the royal apartments of the palace. With him was the Princess Emma von der Tann.

"The people of Lutha will have no other king, sire," said the old man.

Barney turned toward the girl.

"There is no other way, my lord king," she said with grave dignity. "With her blood your mother bequeathed you a duty which you may not shirk. It is not for you or for me to choose. God chose for you when you were born."

Barney Custer took her hand in his and raised it to his lips.

"Let the King of Lutha," he said, "be the first to salute Lutha's queen."

And so Barney Custer, of Beatrice, was crowned King of Lutha, and Emma became his queen. Maenck died of his wound on the floor of the little room in the east transept of the cathedral of Lustadt beside the body of the king he had slain. Prince Peter of Blentz was tried by the highest court of Lutha on the charge of treason; he was found guilty and hanged. Von Coblich committed suicide on the

eve of his arrest. Lieutenant Otto Butzow was ennobled and given the confiscated estates of the Blentz prince. He became a general in the army of Lutha, and was sent to the front in command of the army corps that guarded the northern frontier of the little kingdom.