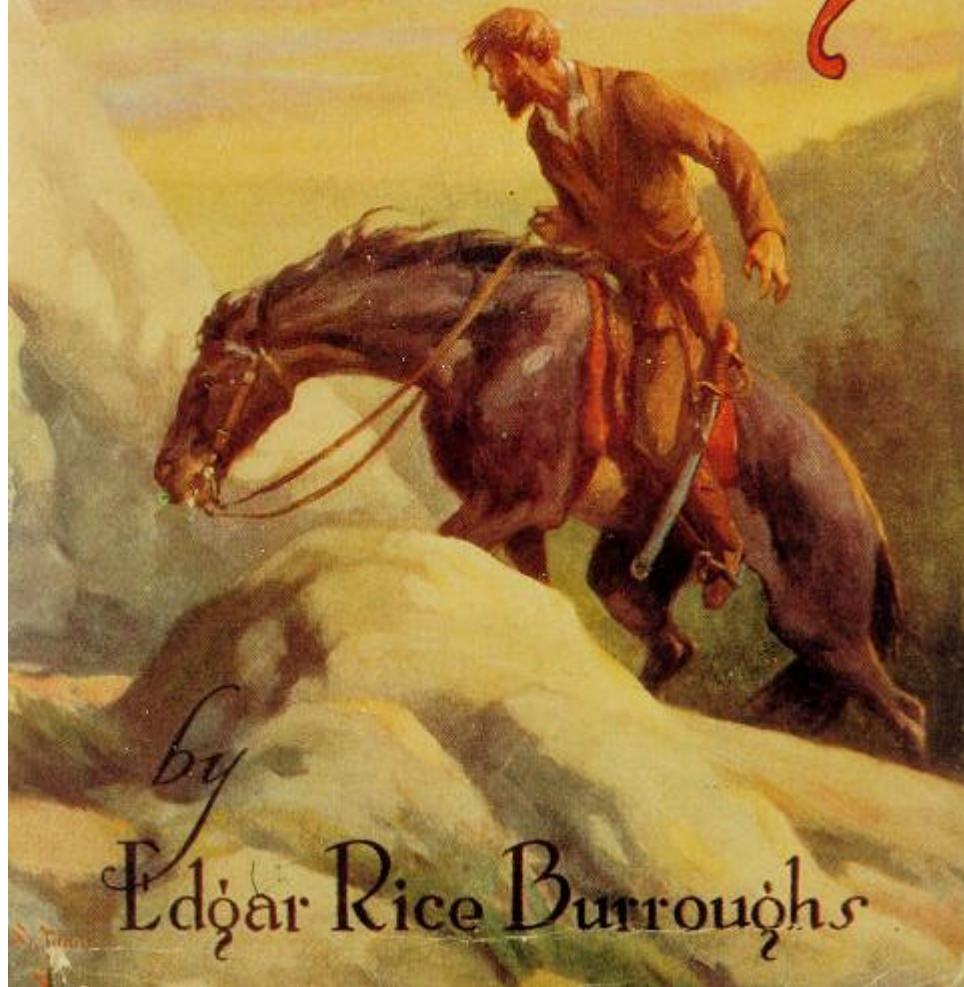


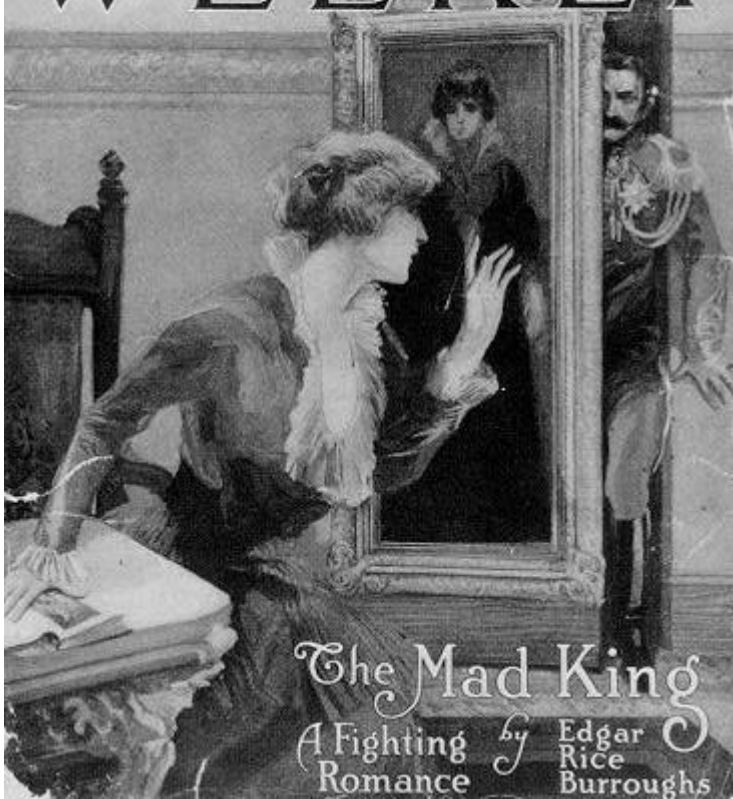
# The Mad King



by  
Edgar Rice Burroughs

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# ALL-STORY WEEKLY



The Mad King  
A Fighting Romance by Edgar Rice Burroughs

THE MAD  
KING

BY  
EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS

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# THE MAD KING

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## CHAPTER I

### A RUNAWAY HORSE

**ALL** Lustadt was in an uproar. The mad king had escaped. Little knots of excited men stood upon the street corners listening to each latest rumor concerning this most absorbing occurrence. Before the palace a great crowd surged to and fro, awaiting they knew not what.

For ten years no man of them had set eyes upon the face of the boy-king who had been hastened to the grim castle of Blentz upon the death of the old king, his father.

There had been murmurings then when the lad's uncle, Peter of Blentz, had announced to the people of Lutha the sudden mental affliction which had fallen upon his nephew, and more murmurings for a time after the announcement that Peter of Blentz had been appointed Regent during the lifetime of the young King Leopold, "or until God, in His infinite mercy, shall see fit to restore to us in full mental vigor our beloved monarch."

But ten years is a long time. The boy-king had become but a vague memory to the subjects who could recall him at all.

There were many, of course, in the capital city, Lustadt, who still retained a mental picture of the handsome boy who had ridden out nearly every morning from the palace gates beside the tall, martial figure of the old king, his father, for a canter across the broad plain which lies at the foot of the mountain town of Lustadt; but even these had long since given up hope that their young king would ever ascend his throne, or even that they should see him alive again.

Peter of Blentz had not proved a good or kind ruler. Taxes had doubled during his regency. Executives and judiciary, following the example of their chief, had become tyrannical and corrupt. For ten years there had been small joy in Lutha.

There had been whispered rumors off and on that the young

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king was dead these many years, but not even in whispers did the men of Lutha dare voice the name of him whom they believed had caused his death. For lesser things they had seen their friends and neighbors thrown into the hitherto long-unused dungeons of the royal castle.

And now came the rumor that Leopold of Lutha had escaped the Castle of Blentz and was roaming somewhere in the wild mountains or ravines upon the opposite side of the plain of Lustadt.

Peter of Blentz was filled with rage and, possibly, fear as well.

"I tell you, Coblich," he cried, addressing his dark-visaged minister of war, "there's more than coincidence in this matter. Someone has betrayed us. That he should have escaped upon the very eve of the arrival at Blentz of the new physician is most suspicious. None but you, Coblich, had knowledge of the part that Dr. Stein was destined to play in this matter," concluded Prince Peter pointedly.

Coblich looked the Regent full in the eye.

"Your highness wrongs not only my loyalty, but my intelligence," he said quietly, "by even so much as intimating that I have any guilty knowledge of Leopold's escape. With Leopold upon the throne of Lutha, where, think you, my prince, would old Coblich be?"

Peter smiled.

"You are right, Coblich," he said. "I know that you would not be such a fool; but whom, then, have we to thank?"

"The walls have ears, prince," replied Coblich, "and we have not always been as careful as we should in discussing the matter. Something may have come to the ears of old Von der Tann. I don't for a moment doubt but that he has his spies among the palace servants, or even the guard. You know the old fox has always made it a point to curry favor with the common soldiers. When he was minister of war he treated them better than he did his officers."

"It seems strange, Coblich, that so shrewd a man as you

should have been unable to discover some irregularity in the political life of Prince Ludwig von der Tann before now," said the prince querulously. "He is the greatest menace to our peace and sovereignty. With Von der Tann out of the way there would be none powerful enough to question our right to the throne of Lutha — after poor Leopold passes away."

"You forget that Leopold has escaped," suggested Coblich, "and that there is no immediate prospect of his passing away."

"He must be retaken at once, Coblich!" cried Prince Peter of Blentz. "He is a dangerous maniac, and we must make this fact plain to the people — this and a thorough description of him. A handsome reward for his safe return to Blentz might not be out of the way, Coblich."

"It shall be done, your highness," replied Coblich. "And about Von der Tann? You have never spoken to me quite so — ah — er — pointedly before. He hunts a great deal in the Old Forest. It might be possible — in fact, it has happened, before — there are many accidents in hunting, are there not, your highness?"

"There are, Coblich," replied the prince, "and if Leopold is able he will make straight for the Tann, so that there may be two hunting together in a day or so, Coblich."

"I understand, your highness," replied the minister. "With your permission, I shall go at once and dispatch troops to search the forest for Leopold. Captain Maenck will command them."

"Good, Coblich! Maenck is a most intelligent and loyal officer. We must reward him well. A baronetcy, at least, if he handles this matter well," said Peter. "It might not be a bad plan to hint at as much to him, Coblich."

And so it happened that shortly thereafter Captain Ernst Maenck, in command of a troop of the Royal Horse Guards of Lutha, set out toward the Old Forest, which lies beyond the mountains that are visible upon the other side of the plain stretching out before Lustadt. At the same time other troopers rode in many directions along the highways and byways of Lutha, tacking placards upon trees and fence posts and beside the doors of every little rural post office.

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The placard told of the escape of the mad king, offering a large reward for his safe return to Blentz.

It was the last paragraph especially which caused a young man, the following day in the little hamlet of Tafelberg, to whistle as he carefully read it over.

“I am glad that I am not the mad king of Lutha,” he said as he paid the storekeeper for the gasoline he had just purchased and stepped into the gray roadster for whose greedy maw it was destined.

“Why, mein Herr?” asked the man.

“This notice practically gives immunity to whoever shoots down the king,” replied the traveler. “Worse still, it gives such an account of the maniacal ferocity of the fugitive as to warrant anyone in shooting him on sight.”

As the young man spoke the storekeeper had examined his face closely for the first time. A shrewd look came into the man’s ordinarily stolid countenance. He leaned forward quite close to the other’s ear.

“We of Lutha,” he whispered, “love our ‘mad king’ — no reward could be offered that would tempt us to betray him. Even in self-protection we would not kill him, we of the mountains who remember him as a boy and loved his father and his grandfather, before him.

“But there are the scum of the low country in the army these days, who would do anything for money, and it is these that the king must guard against. I could not help but note that mein Herr spoke too perfect German for a foreigner. Were I in mein Herr’s place, I should speak mostly the English, and, too, I should shave off the ‘full, reddish-brown beard.’”

Whereupon the storekeeper turned hastily back into his shop, leaving Barney Custer of Beatrice, Nebraska, U.S.A., to wonder if all the inhabitants of Lutha were afflicted with a mental disorder similar to that of the unfortunate ruler.

“I don’t wonder,” soliloquized the young man, “that he advised me to shave off this ridiculous crop of alfalfa. Hang election bets, anyway; if things had gone half right I shouldn’t have



had to wear this badge of idiocy. And to think that it's got to be for a whole month longer! A year's a mighty long while at best, but a year in company with a full set of red whiskers is an eternity."

The road out of Tafelberg wound upward among tall trees toward the pass that would lead him across the next valley on his way to the Old Forest, where he hoped to find some excellent shooting. All his life Barney had promised himself that some day he should visit his mother's native land, and now that he was here he found it as wild and beautiful as she had said it would be.

Neither his mother nor his father had ever returned to the little country since the day, thirty years before, that the big American had literally stolen his bride away, escaping across the border but a scant half-hour ahead of the pursuing troop of Luthanian cavalry. Barney had often wondered why it was that neither of them would ever speak of those days, or of the early life of his mother, Victoria Rubinroth, though of the beauties of her native land Mrs. Custer never tired of talking.

Barney Custer was thinking of these things as his machine wound up the picturesque road. Just before him was a long, heavy grade, and as he took it with open muffler the chugging of his motor drowned the sound of pounding hoof beats rapidly approaching behind him.

It was not until he topped the grade that he heard anything unusual, and at the same instant a girl on horseback tore past him. The speed of the animal would have been enough to have told him that it was beyond the control of its frail rider, even without the added testimony of the broken bit that dangled beneath the tensely outstretched chin.

Foam flecked the beast's neck and shoulders. It was evident that the horse had been running for some distance, yet its speed was still that of the thoroughly frightened runaway.

The road at the point where the animal had passed Custer was cut from the hillside. At the left an embankment rose steeply to a height of ten or fifteen feet. On the right there was a drop of a hundred feet or more into a wooded ravine. Ahead, the road apparently ran quite straight and smooth for a considerable

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distance.

Barney Custer knew that so long as the road ran straight the girl might be safe enough, for she was evidently an excellent horsewoman; but he also knew that if there should be a sharp turn to the left ahead, the horse in his blind fright would in all probability dash headlong into the ravine below him.

There was but a single thing that the man might attempt if he were to save the girl from the almost certain death which seemed in store for her, since he knew that sooner or later the road would turn, as all mountain roads do. The chances that he must take, if he failed, could only hasten the girl's end. There was no alternative except to sit supinely by and see the fear-crazed horse carry its rider into eternity, and Barney Custer was not the sort for that role.

Scarcely had the beast come abreast of him than his foot leaped to the accelerator. Like a frightened deer the gray roadster sprang forward in pursuit. The road was narrow. Two machines could not have passed upon it. Barney took the outside that he might hold the horse away from the dangerous ravine.

At the sound of the whirring thing behind him the animal cast an affrighted glance in its direction, and with a little squeal of terror redoubled its frantic efforts to escape. The girl, too, looked back over her shoulder. Her face was very white, but her eyes were steady and brave.

Barney Custer smiled up at her in encouragement, and the girl smiled back at him.

"She's sure a game one," thought Barney.

Now she was calling to him. At first he could not catch her words above the pounding of the horse's hoofs and the noise of his motor. Presently he understood.

"Stop!" she cried. "Stop or you will be killed. The road turns to the left just ahead. You'll go into the ravine at that speed."

The front wheel of the roadster was at the horse's right flank. Barney stepped upon the accelerator a little harder. There was barely room between the horse and the edge of the road for the four wheels of the roadster, and Barney must be very careful

not to touch the horse. The thought of that and what it would mean to the girl sent a cold shudder through Barney Custer's athletic frame.

The man cast a glance to his right. His machine drove from the left side, and he could not see the road at all over the right hand door. The sight of tree tops waving beneath him was all that was visible. Just ahead the road's edge rushed swiftly beneath the right-hand fender, the wheels on that side must have been on the very verge of the embankment.

Now he was abreast the girl. Just ahead he could see where the road disappeared around a corner of the bluff at the dangerous curve the girl had warned him against.

Custer leaned far out over the side of his car. The lunging of the horse in his stride, and the swaying of the leaping car carried him first close to the girl and then away again. With his right hand he held the car between the frantic horse and the edge of the embankment. His left hand, out-stretched, was almost at the girl's waist. The turn was just before them.

"Jump!" cried Barney.

The girl fell backward from her mount, turning to grasp Custer's arm as it closed about her. At the same instant Barney closed the throttle, and threw all the weight of his body upon the foot brake.

The gray roadster swerved toward the embankment as the hind wheels skidded on the loose surface gravel. They were at the turn. The horse was just abreast the bumper. There was one chance in a thousand of making the turn were the running beast out of the way. There was still a chance if he turned ahead of them. If he did not turn — Barney hated to think of what must follow.

But it was all over in a second. The horse bolted straight ahead. Barney swerved the roadster to the turn. It caught the animal full in the side. There was a sickening lurch as the hind wheels slid over the embankment, and then the man shoved the girl from the running board to the road, and horse, man and roadster went over into the ravine.

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A moment before a tall young man with a reddish-brown beard had stood at the turn of the road listening intently to the sound of the hurrying hoof beats and the purring of the racing motor car approaching from the distance. In his eyes lurked the look of the hunted. For a moment he stood in evident indecision, but just before the runaway horse and the pursuing machine came into view he slipped over the edge of the road to slink into the underbrush far down toward the bottom of the ravine.

When Barney pushed the girl from the running board she fell heavily to the road, rolling over several times, but in an instant she scrambled to her feet, hardly the worse for the tumble other than a few scratches.

Quickly she ran to the edge of the embankment, a look of immense relief coming to her soft, brown eyes as she saw her rescuer scrambling up the precipitous side of the ravine toward her.

“You are not killed?” she cried in German. “It is a miracle!”

“Not even bruised,” reassured Barney. “But you? You must have had a nasty fall.”

“I am not hurt at all,” she replied. “But for you I should be lying dead, or terribly maimed down there at the bottom of that awful ravine at this very moment. It’s awful.” She drew her shoulders upward in a little shudder of horror. “But how did you escape? Even now I can scarce believe it possible.”

“I’m quite sure I don’t know how I did escape,” said Barney, clambering over the rim of the road to her side. “That I had nothing to do with it I am positive. It was just luck. I simply dropped out onto that bush down there.”

They were standing side by side, now peering down into the ravine where the car was visible, bottom side up against a tree, near the base of the declivity. The horse’s head could be seen protruding from beneath the wreckage.

“I’d better go down and put him out of his misery,” said Barney, “if he is not already dead.”

“I think he is quite dead,” said the girl. “I have not seen him move.”

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Just then a little puff of smoke arose from the machine, followed by a tongue of yellow flame. Barney had already started toward the horse.

"Please don't go," begged the girl. "I am sure that he is quite dead, and it wouldn't be safe for you down there now. The gasoline tank may explode any minute."

Barney stopped.

"Yes, he is dead all right," he said, "but all my belongings are down there. My guns, six-shooters and all my ammunition. And," he added ruefully, "I've heard so much about the brigands that infest these mountains."

The girl laughed.

"Those stories are really exaggerated," she said. "I was born in Lutha, and except for a few months each year have always lived here, and though I ride much I have never seen a brigand. You need not be afraid."

Barney Custer looked up at her quickly, and then he grinned. His only fear had been that he would not meet brigands, for Mr. Bernard Custer, Jr., was young and the spirit of Romance and Adventure breathed strong within him.

"Why do you smile?" asked the girl.

"At our dilemma," evaded Barney. "Have you paused to consider our situation?"

The girl smiled, too.

"It is most unconventional," she said. "On foot and alone in the mountains, far from home, and we do not even know each other's name."

"Pardon me," cried Barney, bowing low. "Permit me to introduce myself. I am," and then to the spirits of Romance and Adventure was added a third, the spirit of Deviltry, "I am the mad king of Lutha."

## CHAPTER II

### OVER THE PRECIPICE

THE effect of his words upon the girl were quite different from what he had expected. An American girl would have laughed, knowing that he but joked. This girl did not laugh. Instead her face went white, and she clutched her bosom with her two hands. Her brown eyes peered searchingly into the face of the man.

“Leopold!” she cried in a suppressed voice. “Oh, your majesty, thank God that you are free — and sane!”

Before he could prevent it the girl had seized his hand and pressed it to her lips.

Here was a pretty muddle! Barney Custer swore at himself inwardly for a boorish fool. What in the world had ever prompted him to speak those ridiculous words! And now how was he to unsay them without mortifying this beautiful girl who had just kissed his hand?

She would never forgive that — he was sure of it.

There was but one thing to do, however, and that was to make a clean breast of it. Somehow, he managed to stumble through his explanation of what had prompted him, and when he had finished he saw that the girl was smiling indulgently at him.

“It shall be Mr. Bernard Custer if you wish it so,” she said; “but your majesty need fear nothing from Emma von der Tann. Your secret is as safe with me as with yourself, as the name of Von der Tann must assure you.”

She looked to see the expression of relief and pleasure that her father’s name should have brought to the face of Leopold of Lutha, but when he gave no indication that he had ever before heard the name she sighed and looked puzzled.

“Perhaps,” she thought, “he doubts me. Or can it be possible that, after all, his poor mind is gone?”

“I wish,” said Barney in a tone of entreaty, “that you would forgive and forget my foolish words, and then let me accompany you to the end of your journey.”

“Whither were you bound when I became the means of wrecking your motor car?” asked the girl.

“To the Old Forest,” replied Barney.

Now she was positive that she was indeed with the mad king of Lutha, but she had no fear of him, for since childhood she had heard her father scout the idea that Leopold was mad. For what other purpose would he hasten toward the Old Forest than to take refuge in her father’s castle upon the banks of the Tann at the forest’s verge?

“Thither was I bound also,” she said, “and if you would come there quickly and in safety I can show you a short path across the mountains that my father taught me years ago. It touches the main road but once or twice, and much of the way passes through dense woods and undergrowth where an army might hide.”

“Hadn’t we better find the nearest town,” suggested Barney, “where I can obtain some sort of conveyance to take you home?”

“It would not be safe,” said the girl. “Peter of Blentz will have troops out scouring all Lutha about Blentz and the Old Forest until the king is captured.”

Barney Custer shook his head despairingly.

“Won’t you please believe that I am but a plain American?” he begged.

Upon the bole of a large wayside tree a fresh, new placard stared them in the face. Emma von der Tann pointed at one of the paragraphs.

“Gray eyes, brown hair, and a full reddish-brown beard,” she read. “No matter who you may be,” she said, “you are safer off the highways of Lutha than on them until you can find and use a razor.”

“But I cannot shave until the fifth of November,” said Barney.

Again the girl looked quickly into his eyes and again in her mind rose the question that had hovered there once before. Was he indeed, after all, quite sane?

“Then please come with me the safest way to my father’s,” she urged. “He will know what is best to do.”

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“He cannot make me shave,” insisted Barney.

“Why do you wish not to shave?” asked the girl.

“It is a matter of my honor,” he replied. “I had my choice of wearing a green wastebasket bonnet trimmed with red roses for six months, or a beard for twelve. If I shave off the beard before the fifth of November I shall be without honor in the sight of all men or else I shall have to wear the green bonnet. The beard is bad enough, but the bonnet — ugh!”

Emma von der Tann was now quite assured that the poor fellow was indeed quite demented, but she had seen no indications of violence as yet, though when that too might develop there was no telling. However, he was to her Leopold of Lutha, and her father’s house had been loyal to him or his ancestors for three hundred years.

If she must sacrifice her life in the attempt, nevertheless still must she do all within her power to save her king from recapture and to lead him in safety to the castle upon the Tann.

“Come,” she said; “we waste time here. Let us make haste, for the way is long. At best we cannot reach Tann by dark.”

“I will do anything you wish,” replied Barney, “but I shall never forgive myself for having caused you the long and tedious journey that lies before us. It would be perfectly safe to go to the nearest town and secure a rig.”

Emma von der Tann had heard that it was always well to humor maniacs and she thought of it now. She would put the scheme to the test.

“The reason that I fear to have you go to the village,” she said, “is that I am quite sure they would catch you and shave off your beard.”

Barney started to laugh, but when he saw the deep seriousness of the girl’s eyes he changed his mind. Then he recalled her rather peculiar insistence that he was a king, and it suddenly occurred to him that he had been foolish not to have guessed the truth before.

“That is so,” he agreed; “I guess we had better do as you say,” for he had determined that the best way to handle her would



be to humor her — he had always heard that that was the proper method for handling the mentally defective. “Where is the — er — ah — sanatorium?” he blurted out at last.

“The what?” she asked. “There is no sanatorium near here, your majesty, unless you refer to the Castle of Blentz.”

“Is there no asylum for the insane near by?”

“None that I know of, your majesty.”

For a while they moved on in silence, each wondering what the other might do next.

Barney had evolved a plan. He would try and ascertain the location of the institution from which the girl had escaped and then as gently as possible lead her back to it. It was not safe for as beautiful a woman as she to be roaming through the forest in any such manner as this. He wondered what in the world the authorities at the asylum had been thinking of to permit her to ride out alone in the first place.

“From where did you ride today?” he blurted out suddenly.

“From Tann.”

“That is where we are going now?”

“Yes, your majesty.”

Barney drew a breath of relief. The way had become suddenly difficult and he took the girl’s arm to help her down a rather steep place. At the bottom of the ravine there was a little brook.

“There used to be a fallen log across it here,” said the girl. “How in the world am I ever to get across, your majesty?”

“If you call me that again, I shall begin to believe that I am a king,” he humored her, “and then, being a king, I presume that it wouldn’t be proper for me to carry you across, or would it? Never really having been a king, I do not know.”

“I think,” replied the girl, “that it would be eminently proper.”

She had difficulty in keeping in mind the fact that this handsome, smiling young man was a dangerous maniac, though it was easy to believe that he was the king. In fact, he looked much as she had always pictured Leopold as looking. She had known him

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as a boy, and there were many paintings and photographs of his ancestors in her father's castle. She saw much resemblance between these and the young man.

The brook was very narrow, and the girl thought that it took the young man an unreasonably long time to carry her across, though she was forced to admit that she was far from uncomfortable in the strong arms that bore her so easily.

"Why, what are you doing?" she cried presently. "You are not crossing the stream at all. You are walking right up the middle of it!"

She saw his face flush, and then he turned laughing eyes upon her.

"I am looking for a safe landing," he said.

Emma von der Tann did not know whether to be frightened or amused. As her eyes met the clear, gray ones of the man she could not believe that insanity lurked behind that laughing, level gaze of her carrier. She found herself continually forgetting that the man was mad. He had turned toward the bank now, and a couple of steps carried them to the low sward that fringed the little brooklet. Here he lowered her to the ground.

"Your majesty is very strong," she said. "I should not have expected it after the years of confinement you have suffered."

"Yes," he said, realizing that he must humor her — it was difficult to remember that this lovely girl was insane. "Let me see, now just what was I in prison for? I do not seem to be able to recall it. In Nebraska, they used to hang men for horse stealing; so I am sure it must have been something else not quite so bad. Do you happen to know?"

"When the king, your father, died you were thirteen years old," the girl explained, hoping to reawaken the sleeping mind, "and then your uncle, Prince Peter of Blentz, announced that the shock of your father's death had unbalanced your mind. He shut you up in Blentz then, where you have been for ten years, and he has ruled as regent. Now, my father says, he has recently discovered a plot to take your life so that Peter may become king. But I suppose you learned of that, and because of it you escaped!"

“This Peter person is all-powerful in Lutha?” he asked.

“He controls the army,” the girl replied.

“And you really believe that I am the mad king Leopold?”

“You are the king,” she said in a convincing manner.

“You are a very brave young lady,” he said earnestly. “If all the mad king’s subjects were as loyal as you, and as brave, he would not have languished for ten years behind the walls of Blentz.”

“I am a Von der Tann,” she said proudly, as though that was explanation sufficient to account for any bravery or loyalty.

“Even a Von der Tann might, without dishonor, hesitate to accompany a mad man through the woods,” he replied, “especially if she happened to be a very — a very —” He halted, flushing.

“A very what, your majesty?” asked the girl.

“A very young woman,” he ended lamely.

Emma von der Tann knew that he had not intended saying that at all. Being a woman, she knew precisely what he had meant to say, and she discovered that she would very much have liked to hear him say it.

“Suppose,” said Barney, “that Peter’s soldiers run across us — what then?”

“They will take you back to Blentz, your majesty.”

“And you?”

“I do not think that they will dare lay hands on me, though it is possible that Peter might do so. He hates my father even more now than he did when the old king lived.”

“I wish,” said Mr. Custer, “that I had gone down after my guns. Why didn’t you tell me, in the first place, that I was a king, and that I might get you in trouble if you were found with me? Why, they may even take me for an emperor or a mikado — who knows? And then look at all the trouble we’d be in.”

Which was Barney’s way of humoring a maniac.

“And they might even shave off your beautiful beard.”

Which was the girl’s way.

“Do you think that you would like me better in the green wastebasket hat with the red roses?” asked Barney.

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A very sad look came into the girl's eyes. It was pitiful to think that this big, handsome young man, for whose return to the throne all Lutha had prayed for ten long years, was only a silly half-wit. What might he not have accomplished for his people had this terrible misfortune not overtaken him! In every other way he seemed fitted to be the savior of his country. If she could but make him remember!

"Your majesty," she said, "do you not recall the time that your father came upon a state visit to my father's castle? You were a little boy then. He brought you with him. I was a little girl, and we played together. You would not let me call you 'highness,' but insisted that I should always call you Leopold. When I forgot you would accuse me of *lese-majesté*, and sentence me to — to punishment."

"What was the punishment?" asked Barney, noticing her hesitation and wishing to encourage her in the pretty turn her dementia had taken.

Again the girl hesitated; she hated to say it, but if it would help to recall the past to that poor, dimmed mind, it was her duty.

"Every time I called you 'highness' you made me give you a — a kiss," she almost whispered.

"I hope," said Barney, "that you will be guilty of *lese-majesté* often."

"We were little children then, your majesty," the girl reminded him.

Had he thought her of sound mind Mr. Custer might have taken advantage of his royal prerogatives on the spot, for the girl's lips were most tempting; but when he remembered the poor, weak mind, tears almost came to his eyes, and there sprang to his heart a great desire to protect and guard this unfortunate child.

"And when I was Crown Prince what were you, way back there in the beautiful days of our childhood?" asked Barney.

"Why, I was what I still am, your majesty," replied the girl. "Princess Emma von der Tann."

So the poor child, beside thinking him a king, thought herself a princess! She certainly was mad. Well, he would humor

her.

“Then I should call you ‘your highness,’ shouldn’t I?” he asked.

“You always called me Emma when we were children.”

“Very well, then, you shall be Emma and I Leopold. Is it a bargain?”

“The king’s will is law,” she said.

They had come to a very steep hillside, up which the half-obliterated trail zigzagged toward the crest of a flat-topped hill. Barney went ahead, taking the girl’s hand in his to help her, and thus they came to the top, to stand hand in hand, breathing heavily after the stiff climb.

The girl’s hair had come loose about her temples and a lock was blowing over her face. Her cheeks were very red and her eyes bright. Barney thought he had never looked upon a lovelier picture. He smiled down into her eyes and she smiled back at him.

“I wished, back there a way,” he said, “that that little brook had been as wide as the ocean — now I wish that this little hill had been as high as Mont Blanc.”

“You like to climb?” she asked.

“I should like to climb forever — with you,” he said seriously.

She looked up at him quickly. A reply was on her lips, but she never uttered it, for at that moment a ruffian in picturesque rags leaped out from behind a near-by bush, confronting them with leveled revolver. He was so close that the muzzle of the weapon almost touched Barney’s face. In that the fellow made his mistake.

“You see,” said Barney unexcitedly, “that I was right about the brigands after all. What do you want, my man?”

The man’s eyes had suddenly gone wide. He stared with open mouth at the young fellow before him. Then a cunning look came into his eyes.

“I want you, your majesty,” he said.

“Godfrey!” exclaimed Barney. “Did the whole bunch escape?”

## THE MAD KING

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“Quick!” growled the man. “Hold up your hands. The notice made it plain that you would be worth as much dead as alive, and I have no mind to lose you, so do not tempt me to kill you.”

Barney’s hands went up, but not in the way that the brigand had expected. Instead, one of them seized his weapon and shoved it aside, while with the other Custer planted a blow between his eyes and sent him reeling backward. The two men closed, fighting for possession of the gun. In the scrimmage it was exploded, but a moment later the American succeeded in wresting it from his adversary and hurled it into the ravine.

Striking at one another, the two surged backward and forward at the very edge of the hill, each searching for the other’s throat. The girl stood by, watching the battle with wide, frightened eyes. If she could only do something to aid the king!

She saw a loose stone lying at a little distance from the fighters and hastened to procure it. If she could strike the brigand a single good blow on the side of the head, Leopold might easily overpower him. When she had gathered up the rock and turned back toward the two she saw that the man she thought to be the king was not much in the way of needing outside assistance. She could not but marvel at the strength and dexterity of this poor fellow who had spent almost half his life penned within the four walls of a prison. It must be, she thought, the superhuman strength with which maniacs are always credited.

Nevertheless, she hurried toward them with her weapon; but just before she reached them the brigand made a last mad effort to free himself from the fingers that had found his throat. He lunged backward, dragging the other with him. His foot struck upon the root of a tree, and together the two toppled over into the ravine.

As the girl hastened toward the spot where the two had disappeared, she was startled to see three troopers of the palace cavalry headed by an officer break through the trees at a short distance from where the battle had waged. The four men ran rapidly toward her.

“What has happened here?” shouted the officer to Emma

von der Tann; and then, as he came closer: "Gott! Can it be possible that it is your highness?"

The girl paid no attention to the officer. Instead, she hurried down the steep embankment toward the underbrush into which the two men had fallen. There was no sound from below, and no movement in the bushes to indicate that a moment before two desperately battling human beings had dropped among them.

The soldiers were close upon the girl's heels, but it was she who first reached the two quiet figures that lay side by side upon the stony ground halfway down the hillside.

When the officer stopped beside her she was sitting on the ground holding the head of one of the combatants in her lap.

A little stream of blood trickled from a wound in the forehead. The officer stooped closer.

"He is dead?" he asked.

"The king is dead," replied the Princess Emma von der Tann, a little sob in her voice.

"The king!" exclaimed the officer; and then, as he bent lower over the white face: "Leopold!"

The girl nodded.

"We were searching for him," said the officer, "when we heard the shot." Then, arising, he removed his cap, saying in a very low voice: "The king is dead. Long live the king!"

## CHAPTER III

### AN ANGRY KING

**THE** soldiers stood behind their officer. None of them had ever seen Leopold of Lutha — he had been but a name to them — they cared nothing for him; but in the presence of death they were awed by the majesty of the king they had never known.

The hands of Emma von der Tann were chafing the wrists of the man whose head rested in her lap.

“Leopold!” she whispered. “Leopold, come back! Mad king you may have been, but still you were king of Lutha — my father’s king — my king.”

The girl nearly cried out in shocked astonishment as she saw the eyes of the dead king open. But Emma von der Tann was quick-witted. She knew for what purpose the soldiers from the palace were scouring the country.

Had she not thought the king dead she would have cut out her tongue rather than reveal his identity to these soldiers of his great enemy. Now she saw that Leopold lived, and she must undo the harm she had innocently wrought. She bent lower over Barney’s face, trying to hide it from the soldiers.

“Go away, please!” she called to them. “Leave me with my dead king. You are Peter’s men. You do not care for Leopold, living or dead. Go back to your new king and tell him that this poor young man can never more stand between him and the throne.”

The officer hesitated.

“We shall have to take the king’s body with us, your highness,” he said.

“Go away!” cried the girl, for she saw that the king was attempting to speak. “My father’s people will carry Leopold of Lutha in state to the capital of his kingdom.”

The officer evidently becoming suspicious, came closer, and as he did so Barney Custer sat up.

“What’s all this row about?” he asked. “Can’t you let a dead



king alone if the young lady asks you to? What kind of a short sport are you, anyway? Run along, now, and tie yourself outside.”

The officer smiled, a trifle maliciously perhaps.

“Ah,” he said, “I am very glad indeed that you are not dead, your majesty.”

Barney Custer turned his incredulous eyes upon the lieutenant.

“*Et tu, Brute?*” he cried in anguished accents, letting his head fall back into the girl’s lap. He found it very comfortable there indeed.

The officer smiled and shook his head. Then he tapped his forehead meaningly.

“I did not know,” he said to the girl, “that he was so bad. But come — it is some distance to Blentz, and the afternoon is already well spent. Your highness will accompany us.”

“I?” cried the girl. “You certainly cannot be serious.”

“And why not, your highness?” asked the officer. “We had strict orders to arrest not only the king, but any companions who may have been involved in his escape.”

“I had nothing whatever to do with his escape,” said the girl, “though I should have been only too glad to have aided him had the opportunity presented.”

“King Peter may think differently,” replied the man.

“The Regent, you mean?” the girl corrected him haughtily.

The officer shrugged his shoulders.

“Regent or King, he is ruler of Lutha nevertheless, and he would take away my commission were I to tell him that I had found a Von der Tann in company with the king and had permitted her to escape. Your blood convicts your highness.”

“You are going to take me to Blentz and confine me there?” asked the girl in a very small voice and with wide incredulous eyes. “You would not dare thus to humiliate a Von der Tann?”

“I am very sorry,” said the officer, “but I am a soldier, and soldiers must obey their superiors. My orders are strict. You may be thankful,” he added, “that it was not Maenck who discovered you.”

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At the mention of the name the girl shuddered.

“In so far as it is in my power your highness and his majesty will be accorded every consideration of dignity and courtesy while under my escort. You need not entertain any fear of me,” he concluded.

Barney Custer, during this, to him, remarkable dialogue, had risen to his feet, and assisted the girl in rising. Now he turned and spoke to the officer.

“This farce,” he said, “has gone quite far enough. If it is a joke it is becoming a very sorry one. I am not a king. I am an American — Bernard Custer, of Beatrice, Nebraska, U.S.A. Look at me. Look at me closely. Do I look like a king?”

“Every inch, your majesty,” replied the officer.

Barney looked at the man aghast.

“Well, I am not a king,” he said at last, “and if you go to arresting me and throwing me into one of your musty old dungeons you will find that I am a whole lot more important than most kings. I’m an American citizen.”

“Yes, your majesty,” replied the officer, a trifle impatiently. “But we waste time in idle discussion. Will your majesty be so good as to accompany me without resistance?”

“If you will first escort this young lady to a place of safety,” replied Barney.

“She will be quite safe at Blentz,” said the lieutenant.

Barney turned to look at the girl, a question in his eyes. Before them stood the soldiers with drawn revolvers, and now at the summit of the hill a dozen more appeared in command of a sergeant. They were two against nearly a score, and Barney Custer was unarmed.

The girl shook her head.

“There is no alternative, I am afraid, your majesty,” she said.

Barney wheeled toward the officer.

“Very well, lieutenant,” he said, “we will accompany you.”

The party turned back up the hillside, leaving the dead bandit where he lay — the fellow’s neck had been broken by the fall. A short distance from where the man had confronted them the

two prisoners were brought to the main road where they saw still other troopers, and with them the horses of those who had gone into the forest on foot.

Barney and the girl were mounted on two of the animals, the soldiers who had ridden them clambering up behind two of their comrades. A moment later the troop set out along the road which leads to Blentz.

The prisoners rode near the center of the column, surrounded by troopers. For a time they were both silent. Barney was wondering if he had accidentally tumbled into the private grounds of Lutha's largest madhouse, or if, in reality, these people mistook him for the young king — it seemed incredible.

It had commenced slowly to dawn upon him that perhaps the girl was not crazy after all. Had not the officer addressed her as "your highness"? Now that he thought upon it he recalled that she did have quite a haughty and regal way with her at times, especially so when she had addressed the officer.

Of course she might be mad, after all, and possibly the bandit, too, but it seemed unbelievable that the officer was mad and his entire troop of cavalry should be composed of maniacs, yet they all persisted in speaking and acting as though he were indeed the mad king of Lutha and the young girl at his side a princess.

From pitying the girl he had come to feel a little bit in awe of her. To the best of his knowledge he had never before associated with a real princess. When he recalled that he had treated her as he would an ordinary mortal, and that he had thought her demented, and had tried to humor her mad whims, he felt very foolish indeed.

Presently he turned a sheepish glance in her direction, to find her looking at him. He saw her flush slightly as his eyes met hers.

"Can your highness ever forgive me?" he asked.

"Forgive you!" she cried in astonishment. "For what, your majesty?"

"For thinking you insane, and for getting you into this horrible predicament," he replied. "But especially for thinking you

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insane.”

“Did you think me mad?” she asked in wide-eyed astonishment.

“When you insisted that I was a king, yes,” he replied. “But now I begin to believe that it must be I who am mad, after all, or else I bear a remarkable resemblance to Leopold of Lutha.”

“You do, your majesty,” replied the girl.

Barney saw it was useless to attempt to convince them and so he decided to give up for the time.

“Have me king, if you will,” he said, “but please do not call me ‘your majesty’ any more. It gets on my nerves.”

“Your will is law — Leopold,” replied the girl, hesitating prettily before the familiar name, “but do not forget your part of the compact.”

He smiled at her. A princess wasn’t half so terrible after all.

“And your will shall be my law, Emma,” he said.

It was almost dark when they came to Blentz. The castle lay far up on the side of a steep hill above the town. It was an ancient pile, but had been maintained in an excellent state of repair. As Barney Custer looked up at the grim towers and mighty, buttressed walls his heart sank. It had taken the mad king ten years to make his escape from that gloomy and forbidding pile!

“Poor child,” he murmured, thinking of the girl.

Before the barbican the party was halted by the guard. An officer with a lantern stepped out upon the lowered portcullis. The lieutenant who had captured them rode forward to meet him.

“A detachment of the Royal Horse Guards escorting His Majesty the King who is returning to Blentz,” he said in reply to the officer’s sharp challenge.

“The king!” exclaimed the officer. “You have found him?” and he advanced with raised lantern searching for the monarch.

“At last,” whispered Barney to the girl at his side, “I shall be vindicated. This man, at least, who is stationed at Blentz must know his king by sight.”

The officer came quite close, holding his lantern until the rays fell full in Barney’s face. He scrutinized the young man for a

moment. There was neither humility nor respect in his manner, so that the American was sure that the fellow had discovered the imposture.

From the bottom of his heart he hoped so. Then the officer swung the lantern until its light shone upon the girl.

“And who’s the wench with him?” he asked the officer who had found them.

The man was standing close beside Barney’s horse, and the words were scarce out of his month when the American slipped from his saddle to the portcullis and struck the officer full in the face.

“She is the Princess von der Tann, you boor,” said Barney, “and let that help you remember it in future.”

The officer scrambled to his feet, white with rage. Whipping out his sword he rushed at Barney.

“You shall die for that, you half-wit,” he cried.

Lieutenant Butzow, he of the Royal Horse, rushed forward to prevent the assault and Emma von der Tann sprang from her saddle and threw herself in front of Barney.

Butzow grasped the other officer’s arm.

“Are you mad, Schonau?” he cried. “Would you kill the king?”

The fellow tugged to escape the grasp of Butzow. He was crazed with anger.

“Why not?” he bellowed. “You were a fool not to have done it yourself. Maenck will do it and get a baronetcy. It will mean a captaincy for me at least. Let me at him — no man can strike Karl Schonau and live.”

“The king is unarmed,” cried Emma von der Tann. “Would you murder him in cold blood?”

“He shall not murder him at all, your highness,” said Lieutenant Butzow quietly. “Give me your sword, Lieutenant Schonau. I place you under arrest. What you have just said will not please the Regent when it is reported to him. You should keep your head better when you are angry.”

“It is the truth,” growled Schonau, regretting that his anger

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had led him into a disclosure of the plot against the king's life, but like most weak characters fearing to admit himself in error even more than he feared the consequences of his rash words.

"Do you intend taking my sword?" asked Schonau suddenly, turning toward Lieutenant Butzow standing beside him.

"We will forget the whole occurrence, lieutenant," replied Butzow, "if you will promise not to harm his majesty, or offer him or the Princess von der Tann further humiliation. Their position is sufficiently unpleasant without our adding to the degradation of it."

"Very well," grumbled Schonau. "Pass on into the courtyard."

Barney and the girl remounted and the little cavalcade moved forward through the ballium and the great gate into the court beyond.

"Did you notice," said Barney to the princess, "that even he believes me to be the king? I cannot fathom it."

Within the castle they were met by a number of servants and soldiers. An officer escorted them to the great hall, and presently a dark visaged captain of cavalry entered and approached them. Butzow saluted.

"His Majesty, the King," he announced, "has returned to Blentz. In accordance with the commands of the Regent I deliver his august person into your safe keeping, Captain Maenck."

Maenck nodded. He was looking at Barney with evident curiosity.

"Where did you find him?" he asked Butzow.

He made no pretense of according to Barney the faintest indication of the respect that is supposed to be due to those of royal blood. Barney commenced to hope that he had finally come upon one who would know that he was not king.

Butzow recounted the details of the finding of the king. As he spoke, Maenck's eyes, restless and furtive, seemed to be appraising the personal charms of the girl who stood just back of Barney.

The American did not like the appearance of the officer, but

he saw that he was evidently supreme at Blentz, and he determined to appeal to him in the hope that the man might believe his story and untangle the ridiculous muddle that a chance resemblance to a fugitive monarch had thrown him and the girl into.

“Captain,” said Barney, stepping closer to the officer, “there has been a mistake in identity here. I am not the king. I am an American traveling for pleasure in Lutha. The fact that I have gray eyes and wear a full reddish-brown beard is my only offense. You are doubtless familiar with the king’s appearance and so you at least have already seen that I am not his majesty.

“Not being the king, there is no cause to detain me longer, and as I am not a fugitive and never have been, this young lady has been guilty of no misdemeanor or crime in being in my company. Therefore she too should be released. In the name of justice and common decency I am sure that you will liberate us both at once and furnish the Princess von der Tann, at least, with a proper escort to her home.”

Maenck listened in silence until Barney had finished, a half smile upon his thick lips.

“I am commencing to believe that you are not so crazy as we have all thought,” he said. “Certainly,” and he let his eyes rest upon Emma von der Tann, “you are not mentally deficient in so far as your judgment of a good-looking woman is concerned. I could not have made a better selection myself.

“As for my familiarity with your appearance, you know as well as I that I have never seen you before. But that is not necessary — you conform perfectly to the printed description of you with which the kingdom is flooded. Were that not enough, the fact that you were discovered with old Von der Tann’s daughter is sufficient to remove the least doubt as to your identity.”

“You are governor of Blentz,” cried Barney, “and yet you say that you have never seen the king?”

“Certainly,” replied Maenck. “After you escaped the entire personnel of the garrison here was changed, even the old servants to a man were withdrawn and others substituted. You will have

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difficulty in again escaping, for those who aided you before are no longer here.”

“There is no man in the castle of Blentz who has ever seen the king?” asked Barney.

“None who has seen him before tonight,” replied Maenck. “But were we in doubt we have the word of the Princess Emma that you are Leopold. Did she not admit it to you, Butzow?”

“When she thought his majesty dead she admitted it,” replied Butzow.

“We gain nothing by discussing the matter,” said Maenck shortly. “You are Leopold of Lutha. Prince Peter says that you are mad. All that concerns me is that you do not escape again, and you may rest assured that while Ernst Maenck is governor of Blentz you shall not escape and go at large again.

“Are the royal apartments in readiness for his majesty, Dr. Stein?” he concluded, turning toward a rat-faced little man with bushy whiskers, who stood just behind him.

The query was propounded in an ironical tone, and with a manner that made no pretense of concealing the contempt of the speaker for the man he thought the king.

The eyes of the Princess Emma were blazing as she caught the scant respect in Maenck’s manner. She looked quickly toward Barney to see if he intended rebuking the man for his impertinence. She saw that the king evidently intended overlooking Maenck’s attitude. But Emma von der Tann was of a different mind.

She had seen Maenck several times at social functions in the capital. He had even tried to win a place in her favor, but she had always disliked him, even before the nasty stories of his past life had become common gossip, and within the year she had won his hatred by definitely indicating to him that he was *persona non grata*, in so far as she was concerned. Now she turned upon him, her eyes flashing with indignation.

“Do you forget, sir, that you address the king?” she cried. “That you are without honor I have heard men say, and I may truly believe it now that I have seen what manner of man you are.



The most lowly-bred boor in all Lutha would not be so ungenerous as to take advantage of his king's helplessness to heap indignities upon him.

"Leopold of Lutha shall come into his own some day, and my dearest hope is that his first act may be to mete out to such as you the punishment you deserve."

Maenck paled in anger. His fingers twitched nervously, but he controlled his temper remarkably well, biding his time for revenge.

"Take the king to his apartments, Stein," he commanded curtly, "and you, Lieutenant Butzow, accompany them with a guard, nor leave until you see that he is safely confined. You may return here afterward for my further instructions. In the meantime I wish to examine the king's mistress."

For a moment tense silence reigned in the apartment after Maenck had delivered his wanton insult.

Emma von der Tann, her little chin high in the air, stood straight and haughty, nor was there any sign in her expression to indicate that she had heard the man's words.

Barney was the first to take cognizance of them.

"You cur!" he cried, and took a step toward Maenck. "You're going to eat that, word for word."

Maenck stepped back, his hand upon his sword. Butzow laid a hand upon Barney's arm.

"Don't, your majesty," he implored, "it will but make your position more unpleasant, nor will it add to the safety of the Princess von der Tann for you to strike him now."

Barney shook himself free from Butzow, and before either Stein or the lieutenant could prevent had sprung upon Maenck.

The latter had not been quick enough with his sword, so that Barney had struck him twice, heavily in the face before the officer was able to draw. Butzow had sprung to the king's side, and was attempting to interpose himself between Maenck and the American. In a moment more the sword of the infuriated captain would be in the king's heart. Barney turned the first thrust with his forearm.

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“Stop!” cried Butzow to Maenck. “Are you mad, that you would kill the king?”

Maenck lunged again, viciously, at the unprotected body of his antagonist.

“Die, you pig of an idiot!” he screamed.

Butzow saw that the man really meant to murder Leopold. He seized Barney by the shoulder and whirled him backward. At the same instant his own sword leaped from his scabbard, and now Maenck found himself facing grim steel in the hand of a master swordsman.

The governor of Blentz drew back from the touch of that sharp point.

“What do you mean?” he cried. “This is mutiny.”

“When I received my commission,” replied Butzow, quietly, “I swore to protect the person of the king with my life, and while I live no man shall affront Leopold of Lutha in my presence, or threaten his safety else he accounts to me for his act. Return your sword, Captain Maenck, nor ever again draw it against the king while I be near.”

Slowly Maenck sheathed his weapon. Black hatred for Butzow and the man he was protecting smoldered in his eyes.

“If he wishes peace,” said Barney, “let him apologize to the princess.”

“You had better apologize, captain,” counseled Butzow, “for if the king should command me to do so I should have to compel you to,” and the lieutenant half drew his sword once more.

There was something in Butzow’s voice that warned Maenck that his subordinate would like nothing better than the king’s command to run him through.

He well knew the fame of Butzow’s sword arm, and having no stomach for an encounter with it he grumbled an apology.

“And don’t let it occur again,” warned Barney.

“Come,” said Dr. Stein, “your majesty should be in your apartments, away from all excitement, if we are to effect a cure, so that you may return to your throne quickly.”

Butzow formed the soldiers about the American, and the

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party moved silently out of the great hall, leaving Captain Maenck and Princess Emma von der Tann its only occupants.

Barney cast a troubled glance toward Maenck, and half hesitated.

“I am sorry, your majesty,” said Butzow in a low voice, “but you must accompany us. In this the governor of Blentz is well within his authority, and I must obey him.”

“Heaven help her!” murmured Barney.

“The governor will not dare harm her,” said Butzow. “Your majesty need entertain no apprehension.”

“I wouldn’t trust him,” replied the American. “I know his kind.”

## CHAPTER IV

### BARNEY FINDS A FRIEND

**AFTER** the party had left the room Maenck stood looking at the princess for several seconds. A cunning expression supplanted the anger that had shown so plainly upon his face but a moment before. The girl had moved to one side of the apartment and was pretending an interest in a large tapestry that covered the wall at that point. Maenck watched her with greedy eyes. Presently he spoke.

“Let us be friends,” he said. “You shall be my guest at Blentz for a long time. I doubt if Peter will care to release you soon, for he has no love for your father — and it will be easier for both if we establish pleasant relations from the beginning. What do you say?”

“I shall not be at Blentz long,” she replied, not even looking in Maenck’s direction, “though while I am it shall be as a prisoner and not as a guest. It is incredible that one could believe me willing to pose as the guest of a traitor, even were he less impossible than the notorious and infamous Captain Maenck.”

Maenck smiled. He was one of those who rather pride themselves upon the possession of racy reputations. He walked across the room to a bell cord which he pulled. Then he turned toward the girl again.

“I have given you an opportunity,” he said, “to lighten the burdens of your captivity. I hoped that you would be sensible and accept my advances of friendship voluntarily,” and he emphasized the word “voluntarily,” “but ——”

He shrugged his shoulders.

A servant had entered the apartment in response to Maenck’s summons.

“Show the Princess von der Tann to her apartments,” he commanded with a sinister tone.

The man, who was in the livery of Peter of Blentz, bowed, and with a deferential sign to the girl led the way from the room. Emma von der Tann followed her guide up a winding stairway

which spiraled within a tower at the end of a long passage. On the second floor of the castle the servant led her to a large and beautifully furnished suite of three rooms — a bedroom, dressing-room and boudoir. After showing her the rooms that were to be hers the servant left her alone.

As soon as he had gone the Princess von der Tann took another turn through the suite, looking to the doors and windows to ascertain how securely she might barricade herself against unwelcome visitors.

She found that the three rooms lay in an angle of the old, moss-covered castle wall.

The bedroom and dressing-room were connected by a doorway, and each in turn had another door opening into the boudoir. The only connection with the corridor without was through a single doorway from the boudoir. This door was equipped with a massive bolt, which, when she had shot it, gave her a feeling of immense relief and security. The windows were all too high above the court on one side and the moat upon the other to cause her the slightest apprehension of danger from the outside.

The girl found the boudoir not only beautiful, but extremely comfortable and cozy. A huge log-fire blazed upon the hearth, and, though it was summer, its warmth was most welcome, for the night was chill. Across the room from the fireplace a full length oil of a former Blentz princess looked down in arrogance upon the unwilling occupant of the room. It seemed to the girl that there was an expression of annoyance upon the painted countenance that another, and an enemy of her house, should be making free with her belongings. She wondered a little, too, that this huge oil should have been hung in a lady's boudoir. It seemed singularly out of place.

"If she would but smile," thought Emma von der Tann, "she would detract less from the otherwise pleasant surroundings, but I suppose she serves her purpose in some way, whatever it may be."

There were papers, magazines and books upon the center table and more books upon a low tier of shelves on either side of the fireplace. The girl tried to amuse herself by reading, but she

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found her thoughts continually reverting to the unhappy situation of the king, and her eyes momentarily wandered to the cold and repellent face of the Blentz princess.

Finally she wheeled a great armchair near the fireplace, and with her back toward the portrait made a final attempt to submerge her unhappy thoughts in a current periodical.

When Barney and his escort reached the apartments that had been occupied by the king of Lutha before his escape, Butzow and the soldiers left him in company with Dr. Stein and an old servant, whom the doctor introduced as his new personal attendant.

“Your majesty will find him a very attentive and faithful servant,” said Stein. “He will remain with you and administer your medicine at proper intervals.”

“Medicine?” ejaculated Barney. “What in the world do I need of medicine? There is nothing the matter with me.”

Stein smiled indulgently.

“Ah, your majesty,” he said, “if you could but realize the sad affliction that clouds your life! You may never sit upon your throne until the last trace of this sinister mental disorder is eradicated, so take your medicine voluntarily, or otherwise Joseph will be compelled to administer it by force. Remember, sire, that only through this treatment will you be able to leave Blentz.”

After Stein had left the room Joseph bolted the door behind him. Then he came to where Barney stood in the center of the apartment, and dropping to his knees took the young man’s hand in his and kissed it.

“God has been good indeed, your majesty,” he whispered. “It was He who made it possible for old Joseph to deceive them and find his way to your side.”

“Who are you, my man?” asked Barney.

“I am from Tann,” whispered the old man, in a very low voice. “His highness, the prince, found the means to obtain service for me with the new retinue that has replaced the old which permitted your majesty’s escape. There was another from Tann

among the former servants here.

“It was through his efforts that you escaped before, you will recall. I have seen Fritz and learned from him the way, so that if your majesty does not recall it it will make no difference, for I know it well, having been over it three times already since I came here, to be sure that when the time came that they should recapture you I might lead you out quickly before they could slay you.”

“You really think that they intend murdering me?”

“There is no doubt about it, your majesty,” replied the old man. “This very bottle” — Joseph touched the phial which Stein had left upon the table — “contains the means whereby, through my hands, you were to be slowly poisoned.”

“Do you know what it is?”

“Bichloride of mercury, your majesty. One dose would have been sufficient, and after a few days — perhaps a week — you would have died in great agony.”

Barney shuddered.

“But I am not the king, Joseph,” said the young man, “so even had they succeeded in killing me it would have profited them nothing.”

Joseph shook his head sadly.

“Your majesty will pardon the presumption of one who loves him,” he said, “if he makes so bold as to suggest that your majesty must not again deny that he is king. That only tends to corroborate the contention of Prince Peter that your majesty is not — er — just sane, and so, incompetent to rule Lutha. But we of Tann know differently, and with the help of the good God we will place your majesty upon the throne which Peter has kept from you all these years.”

Barney sighed. They were determined that he should be king whether he would or no. He had often thought he would like to be a king; but now the realization of his boyish dreaming which seemed so imminent bade fair to be almost anything than pleasant.

Barney suddenly realized that the old fellow was talking. He was explaining how they might escape. It seemed that a secret

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passage led from this very chamber to the vaults beneath the castle and from there through a narrow tunnel below the moat to a cave in the hillside far beyond the structure.

“They will not return again tonight to see your majesty,” said Joseph, “and so we had best make haste to leave at once. I have a rope and swords in readiness. We shall need the rope to make our way down the hillside, but let us hope that we shall not need the swords.”

“I cannot leave Blentz,” said Barney, “unless the Princess Emma goes with us.”

“The Princess Emma!” cried the old man. “What Princess Emma?”

“Princess von der Tann,” replied Barney. “Did you not know that she was captured with me!”

The old man was visibly affected by the knowledge that his young mistress was a prisoner within the walls of Blentz. He seemed torn by conflicting emotions — his duty toward his king and his love for the daughter of his old master. So it was that he seemed much relieved when he found that Barney insisted upon saving the girl before any thought of their own escape should be taken into consideration.

“My first duty, your majesty,” said Joseph, “is to bring you safely out of the hands of your enemies, but if you command me to try to bring your betrothed with us I am sure that his highness, Prince Ludwig, would be the last to censure me for deviating thus from his instructions, for if he loves another more than he loves his king it is his daughter, the beautiful Princess Emma.”

“What do you mean, Joseph,” asked Barney, “by referring to the princess as my betrothed? I never saw her before today.”

“It has slipped your majesty’s mind,” said the old man sadly; “but you and my young mistress were betrothed many years ago while you were yet but children. It was the old king’s wish that you wed the daughter of his best friend and most loyal subject.”

Here was a pretty pass, indeed, thought Barney. It was sufficiently embarrassing to be mistaken for the king, but to be thrown into this false position in company with a beautiful young



woman to whom the king was engaged to be married, and who, with the others, thought him to be the king, was quite the last word in impossible positions.

Following this knowledge there came to Barney the first pangs of regret that he was not really the king, and then the realization, so sudden that it almost took his breath away, that the girl was very beautiful and very much to be desired. He had not thought about the matter until her utter impossibility was forced upon him.

It was decided that Joseph should leave the king's apartment at once and discover in what part of the castle Emma von der Tann was imprisoned. Their further plans were to depend upon the information gained by the old man during his tour of investigation of the castle.

In the interval of his absence Barney paced the length of his prison time and time again. He thought the fellow would never return. Perhaps he had been detected in the act of spying, and was himself a prisoner in some other part of the castle! The thought came to Barney like a blow in the face, for he realized that then he would be entirely at the mercy of his captors, and that there would be none to champion the cause of the Princess von der Tann.

When his nervous tension had about reached the breaking point there came a sound of stealthy movement just outside the door of his room. Barney halted close to the massive panels. He heard a key fitted quietly and then the lock grated as it turned.

Barney thought that they had surely detected Joseph's duplicity and had come to make short work of the king before other traitors arose in their midst entirely to frustrate their plans. The young American stepped to the wall behind the door that he might be out of sight of whoever entered. Should it prove other than Joseph, might the Lord help them! The clenched fists, square-set chin, and gleaming gray eyes of the prisoner presaged no good for any incoming enemy.

Slowly the door swung open and a man entered the room. Barney breathed a deep sigh of relief — it was Joseph.

"Well?" cried the young man from behind him, and Joseph

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started as though Peter of Blentz himself had laid an accusing finger upon his shoulder. "What news?"

"Your majesty," gasped Joseph, "how you did startle me! I found the apartments of the princess, sire. There is a bare chance that we may succeed in rescuing her, but a very bare one, indeed.

"We must traverse a main corridor of the castle to reach her suite, and then return by the same way. It will be a miracle if we are not discovered; but the worst of it is that next to her apartments, and between them and your majesty's, are the apartments of Captain Maenck.

"He is sure to be there and officers and servants may be coming and going throughout the entire night, for the man is a convivial fellow, sitting at cards and drink until sunrise nearly every day."

"And when we have brought the princess in safety to my quarters," asked Barney, "what then? How shall we conduct her from the castle? You have not told me that as yet."

The old man explained then the plan of escape. It seemed that one of the two huge tile panels that flanked the fireplace on either side was in reality a door hiding the entrance to a shaft that rose from the vaults beneath the castle to the roof. At each floor there was a similar secret door concealing the mouth of the passage. From the vaults a corridor led through another secret panel to the tunnel that wound downward to the cave in the hillside.

"Beyond that we shall find horses, your majesty," concluded the old man. "They have been hidden in the woods since I came to Blentz. Each day I go there to water and feed them."

During the servant's explanation Barney had been casting about in his mind for some means of rescuing the princess without so great risk of detection, and as the plan of the secret passageway became clear to him he thought that he saw a way to accomplish the thing with comparative safety in so far as detection was concerned.

"Who occupies the floor above us, Joseph?" he asked.

"It is vacant," replied the old man.

“Good! Come, show me the entrance to the shaft,” directed Barney.

“You will go without attempting to succor the Princess Emma?” exclaimed the old fellow in ill-concealed chagrin.

“Far from it,” replied Barney. “Bring your rope and the swords. I think we are going to find the rescuing of the Princess Emma the easiest part of our adventure.”

The old man shook his head, but went to another room of the suite, from which he presently emerged with a stout rope about fifty feet in length and two swords. As he buckled one of the weapons to Barney his eyes fell upon the American’s seal ring that encircled the third finger of his left hand.

“The Royal Ring of Lutha!” exclaimed Joseph. “Where is it, your majesty? What has become of the Royal Ring of the Kings of Lutha?”

“I’m sure I don’t know, Joseph,” replied the young man. “Should I be wearing a royal ring?”

“The profaning miscreants!” cried Joseph. “They have dared to filch from you the great ring that has been handed down from king to king for three hundred years. When did they take it from you?”

“I have never seen it, Joseph,” replied the young man, “and possibly this fact may assure you where all else has failed that I am no true king of Lutha, after all.”

“Ah, no, your majesty,” replied the old servitor; “it but makes assurance doubly sure as to your true identity, for the fact that you have not the ring is positive proof that you are king and that they have sought to hide the fact by removing the insignia of your divine right to rule in Lutha.”

Barney could not but smile at the old fellow’s remarkable logic. He saw that nothing short of a miracle would ever convince Joseph that he was not the real monarch, and so, as matters of greater importance were to the fore, he would have allowed the subject to drop had not the man attempted to recall to the impoverished memory of his king a recollection of the historic and venerated relic of the dead monarchs of Lutha.

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“Do you not remember, sir,” he asked, “the great ruby that glared, blood-red from its center, and the four sets of golden wings that formed the setting? From the blood of Charlemagne was the ruby made, so history tells us, and the setting represented the protecting wings of the power of the kings of Lutha spread to the four points of the compass. Now your majesty must recall the royal ring, I am sure.”

Barney only shook his head, much to Joseph’s evident sorrow.

“Never mind the ring, Joseph,” said the young man. “Bring your rope and lead me to the floor above.”

“The floor above? But, your majesty, we cannot reach the vaults and tunnel by going upward!”

“You forget, Joseph, that we are going to fetch the Princess Emma first.”

“But she is not on the floor above us, sire; she is upon the same floor as we are,” insisted the old man, hesitating.

“Joseph, who do you think I am?” asked Barney.

“You are the king, my lord,” replied the old man.

“Then do as your king commands,” said the American sharply.

Joseph turned with dubious mutterings and approached the tiled panel at the left of the fireplace. Here he fumbled about for a moment until his fingers found the hidden catch that held the cunningly devised door in place. An instant later the panel swung inward before his touch, and standing to one side, the old fellow bowed low as he ushered Barney into the Stygian darkness of the space beyond their vision.

Joseph halted the young man just within the doorway, cautioning him against the danger of falling into the shaft, then he closed the panel, and a moment later had found the lantern he had hidden there and lighted it. The rays disclosed to the American the rough masonry of the interior of a narrow, well-built shaft. A rude ladder standing upon a narrow ledge beside him extended upward to lose itself in the shadows above. At its foot the top of another ladder was visible protruding through the opening from

the floor beneath.

No sooner had Joseph's lantern shown him the way than Barney was ascending the ladder toward the floor above. At the next landing he waited for the old man.

Joseph put out the light and placed the lantern where they could easily find it upon their return. Then he cautiously slipped the catch that held the panel in place and slowly opened the door until a narrow line of lesser darkness showed from without.

For a moment they stood in silence listening for any sound from the chamber beyond, but as nothing occurred to indicate that the apartment was occupied the old man opened the portal a trifle further, and finally far enough to permit his body to pass through. Barney followed him. They found themselves in a large, empty chamber, identical in size and shape with that which they had just quitted upon the floor below.

From this the two passed into the corridor beyond, and thence to the apartments at the far end of the wing, directly over those occupied by Emma von der Tann.

Barney hastened to a window overlooking the moat. By leaning far out he could see the light from the princess's chamber shining upon the sill. He wished that the light was not there, for the window was in plain view of the guard on the lookout upon the barbican.

Suddenly he caught the sound of voices from the chamber beneath. For an instant he listened, and then, catching a few words of the dialogue, he turned hurriedly toward his companion.

"The rope, Joseph! And for God's sake be quick about it."

## CHAPTER V

### THE ESCAPE

**FOR** half an hour the Princess von der Tann succeeded admirably in immersing herself in the periodical, to the exclusion of her unhappy thoughts and the depressing influence of the austere countenance of the Blentz Princess hanging upon the wall behind her.

But presently she became unaccountably nervous. At the slightest sound from the palace-life on the floor below she would start up with a tremor of excitement. Once she heard footsteps in the corridor before her door, but they passed on, and she thought she discerned the click of a latch a short distance further on along the passageway.

Again she attempted to gather up the thread of the article she had been reading, but she was unsuccessful. A stealthy scratching brought her round quickly, staring in the direction of the great portrait. The girl would have sworn that she had heard a noise within her chamber. She shuddered at the thought that it might have come from that painted thing upon the wall.

What was the matter with her? Was she losing all control of herself to be frightened like a little child by ghostly noises?

She tried to return to her reading, but for the life of her she could not keep her eyes off the silent, painted woman who stared and stared and stared in cold, threatening silence upon this ancient enemy of her house.

Presently the girl's eyes went wide in horror. She could feel the scalp upon her head contract with fright. Her terror-filled gaze was frozen upon that awful figure that loomed so large and sinister above her, for the thing had moved! She had seen it with her own eyes. There could be no mistake — no hallucination of overwrought nerves about it. The Blentz Princess was moving slowly toward her!

Like one in a trance the girl rose from her chair, her eyes glued upon the awful apparition that seemed creeping upon her.

Slowly she withdrew toward the opposite side of the chamber. As the painting moved more quickly the truth flashed upon her — it was mounted on a door.

The crack of the door widened and beyond it the girl saw dimly, eyes fastened upon her. With difficulty she restrained a shriek. The portal swung wide and a man in uniform stepped into the room.

It was Maenck.

Emma von der Tann gazed in unveiled abhorrence upon the leering face of the governor of Blentz.

“What means this intrusion?” cried the girl.

“What would you have here?”

“You,” replied Maenck.

The girl crimsoned.

Maenck regarded her sneeringly.

“You coward!” she cried. “Leave my apartments at once. Not even Peter of Blentz would countenance such abhorrent treatment of a prisoner.”

“You do not know Peter my dear,” responded Maenck. “But you need not fear. You shall be my wife. Peter has promised me a baronetcy for the capture of Leopold, and before I am done I shall be made a prince, of that you may rest assured, so you see I am not so bad a match after all.”

He crossed over toward her and would have laid a rough hand upon her arm.

The girl sprang away from him, running to the opposite side of the library table at which she had been reading. Maenck started to pursue her, when she seized a heavy, copper bowl that stood upon the table and hurled it full in his face. The missile struck him a glancing blow, but the edge laid open the flesh of one cheek almost to the jaw bone.

With a cry of pain and rage Captain Ernst Maenck leaped across the table full upon the young girl. With vicious, murderous fingers he seized upon her fair throat, shaking her as a terrier might shake a rat. Futilely the girl struck at the hate-contorted features so close to hers.

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“Stop!” she cried. “You are killing me.”

The fingers released their hold.

“No,” muttered the man, and dragged the princess roughly across the room.

Half a dozen steps he had taken when there came a sudden crash of breaking glass from the window across the chamber. Both turned in astonishment to see the figure of a man leap into the room, carrying the shattered crystal and the casement with him. In one hand was a naked sword.

“The king!” cried Emma von der Tann.

“The devil!” muttered Maenck, as, dropping the girl, he scurried toward the great painting from behind which he had found ingress to the chambers of the princess.

Maenck was a coward, and he had seen murder in the eyes of the man rushing upon him. With a bound he reached the picture which still stood swung wide into the room.

Barney was close behind him, but fear lent wings to the governor of Blentz, so that he was able to dart into the passage behind the picture and slam the door behind him a moment before the infuriated man was upon him.

The American clawed at the edge of the massive frame, but all to no avail. Then he raised his sword and slashed the canvas, hoping to find a way into the place beyond, but mighty oaken panels barred his further progress. With a whispered oath he turned back toward the girl.

“Thank Heaven that I was in time, Emma,” he cried.

“Oh, Leopold, my king, but at what a price,” replied the girl. “He will return now with others and kill you. He is furious — so furious that he scarce knows what he does.”

“He seemed to know what he was doing when he ran for that hole in the wall,” replied Barney with a grin. “But come, it won’t pay to let them find us should they return.”

Together they hastened to the window beyond which the girl could see a rope dangling from above. The sight of it partially solved the riddle of the king’s almost uncanny presence upon her window sill in the very nick of time.



Below, the lights in the watch tower at the outer gate were plainly visible, and the twinkling of them reminded Barney of the danger of detection from that quarter. Quickly he recrossed the apartment to the wall-switch that operated the recently installed electric lights, and an instant later the chamber was in total darkness.

Once more at the girl's side Barney drew in one end of the rope and made it fast about her body below her arms, leaving a sufficient length terminating in a small loop to permit her to support herself more comfortably with one foot within the noose. Then he stepped to the outer sill, and reaching down assisted her to his side.

Far below them the moonlight played upon the sluggish waters of the moat. In the distance twinkled the lights of the village of Blentz. From the courtyard and the palace came faintly the sound of voices, and the movement of men. A horse whinnied from the stables.

Barney turned his eyes upward. He could see the head and shoulders of Joseph leaning from the window of the chamber directly above them.

"Hoist away, Joseph!" whispered the American, and to the girl: "Be brave. Shut your eyes and trust to Joseph and — and —"

"And my king," finished the girl for him.

His arm was about her shoulders, supporting her upon the narrow sill. His cheek so close to hers that once he felt the soft velvet of it brush his own. Involuntarily his arm tightened about the supple body.

"My princess!" he murmured, and as he turned his face toward hers their lips almost touched.

Joseph was pulling upon the rope from above. They could feel it tighten beneath the girl's arms. Impulsively Barney Custer drew the sweet lips closer to his own. There was no resistance.

"I love you," he whispered. The words were smothered as their lips met.

Joseph, above, wondered at the great weight of the Princess Emma von der Tann.

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“I love you, Leopold, forever,” whispered the girl, and then as Joseph’s Herculean tugging seemed likely to drag them both from the narrow sill, Barney lifted the girl upward with one hand while he clung to the window frame with the other. The distance to the sill above was short, and a moment later Joseph had grasped the princess’s hand and was helping her over the ledge into the room beyond.

At the same instant there came a sudden commotion from the interior of the room in the window of which Barney still stood waiting for Joseph to remove the rope from about the princess and lower it for him. Barney heard the heavy feet of men, the clank of arms, and muttered oaths as the searchers stumbled against the furniture.

Presently one of them found the switch and instantly the room was flooded with light, which revealed to the American a dozen Luthanian troopers headed by the murderous Maenck.

Barney looked anxiously aloft. Would Joseph never lower that rope! Within the room the men were searching. He could hear Maenck directing them. Only a thin portière screened him from their view. It was but a matter of seconds before they would investigate the window through which Maenck knew the king had found ingress.

Yes! It had come.

“Look to the window,” commanded Maenck. “He may have gone as he came.”

Two of the soldiers crossed the room toward the casement. From above Joseph was lowering the rope; but it was too late. The men would be at the window before he could clamber out of their reach.

“Hoist away!” he whispered to Joseph. “Quick now, my man, and make your escape with the Princess von der Tann. It is the king’s command.”

Already the soldiers were at the window. At the sound of his voice they tore aside the draperies; at the same instant the pseudo-king turned and leaped out into the blackness of the night.

There were exclamations of surprise and rage from the

soldiers — a woman's scream. Then from far below came a dull splash as the body of Bernard Custer struck the surface of the moat.

Maenck, leaning from the window, heard the scream and the splash, and jumped to the conclusion that both the king and the princess had attempted to make their escape in this hare-brained way. Immediately all the resources at his command were put to the task of searching the moat and the adjacent woods.

He was sure that one or both of the prisoners would be stunned by impact with the surface of the water, and then drowned before they regained consciousness, but he did not know Bernard Custer, nor the facility and almost uncanny ease with which that young man could negotiate a high dive into shallow water.

Nor did he know that upon the floor above him one Joseph was hastening along a dark corridor toward a secret panel in another apartment, and that with him was the Princess Emma bound for liberty and safety far from the frowning walls of Blentz.

As Barney's head emerged above the surface of the moat he shook it vigorously to free his eyes from water, and then struck out for the further bank.

Long before his pursuers had reached the courtyard and alarmed the watch at the barbican, the American had crawled out upon dry land and hastened across the broad clearing to the patch of stunted trees that grew lower down upon the steep hillside before the castle.

He shrank from the thought of leaving Blentz without knowing positively that Joseph had made good the escape of himself and the princess, but he finally argued that even if they had been retaken, he could serve her best by hastening to her father and fetching the only succor that might prevail against the strength of Blentz — armed men in sufficient force to storm the ancient fortress.

He had scarcely entered the wood when he heard the sound of the searchers at the moat, and saw the rays of their lanterns flitting hither and thither as they moved back and forth along the bank.

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Then the young man turned his face from the castle and set forth across the unfamiliar country in the direction of the Old Forest and the castle Von der Tann.

The memory of the warm lips that had so recently been pressed to his urged him on in the service of the wondrous girl who had come so suddenly into his life, bringing to him the realization of a love that he knew must alter, for happiness or for sorrow, all the balance of his existence, even unto death.

He dreaded the day of reckoning when, at last, she must learn that he was no king. He did not have the temerity to hope that her courage would be equal to the great sacrifice which the acknowledgment of her love for one not of noble blood must entail; but he could not believe that she would cease to love him when she learned the truth.

So the future looked black and cheerless to Barney Custer as he trudged along the rocky, moonlit way. The only bright spot was the realization that for a while at least he might be serving the one woman in all the world.

All the balance of the long night the young man traversed valley and mountain, holding due south in the direction he supposed the Old Forest to lie. He passed many a little farm tucked away in the hollow of a hillside, and quaint hamlets, and now and then the ruins of an ancient feudal stronghold, but no great forest of black oaks loomed before him to apprise him of the nearness of his goal, nor did he dare to ask the correct route at any of the homes he passed.

His fatal likeness to the description of the mad king of Lutha warned him from intercourse with the men of Lutha until he might know which were friends and which enemies of the hapless monarch.

Dawn found him still upon his way, but with the determination fully crystallized to hail the first man he met and ask the way to Tann. He still avoided the main traveled roads, but from time to time he paralleled them close enough that he might have ample opportunity to hail the first passerby.

The road was becoming more and more mountainous and

difficult. There were fewer homes and no hamlets, and now he began to despair entirely of meeting any who could give him direction unless he turned and retraced his steps to the nearest farm.

Directly before him the narrow trail he had been following for the past few miles wound sharply about the shoulder of a protruding cliff. He would see what lay beyond the turn — perhaps he would find the Old Forest there, after all.

But instead he found something very different, though in its way quite as interesting, for as he rounded the rugged bluff he came face to face with two evil-looking fellows astride stocky, rough-coated ponies.

At sight of him they drew in their mounts and eyed him suspiciously. Nor was there great cause for wonderment in that, for the American presented aught but a respectable appearance. His khaki motoring suit, soaked from immersion in the moat, had but partially dried upon him. Mud from the banks of the stagnant pool caked his legs to the knees, almost hiding his once tan puttees. More mud streaked his jacket front and stained its sleeves to the elbows. He was bare-headed, for his cap had remained in the moat at Blentz, and his disheveled hair was tousled upon his head, while his full beard had dried into a weird and tangled fringe about his face. At his side still hung the sword that Joseph had buckled there, and it was this that caused the two men the greatest suspicion of this strange looking character.

They continued to eye Barney in silence, every now and then casting apprehensive glances beyond him, as though expecting others of his kind to appear in the trail at his back. And that is precisely what they did fear, for the sword at Barney's side had convinced them that he must be an officer of the army, and they looked to see his command following in his wake.

The young man saluted them pleasantly, asking the direction to the Old Forest. They thought it strange that a soldier of Lutha should not know his own way about his native land, and so judged that his question was but a blind to deceive them.

“Why do you not ask your own men the way?” parried one

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of the fellows.

“I have no men, I am alone,” replied Barney. “I am a stranger in Lutha and have lost my way.”

He who had spoken before pointed to the sword at Barney’s side.

“Strangers traveling in Lutha do not wear swords,” he said. “You are an officer. Why should you desire to conceal the fact from two honest farmers? We have done nothing. Let us go our way.”

Barney looked his astonishment at this reply.

“Most certainly, go your way, my friends,” he said laughing. “I would not delay you if I could; but before you go please be good enough to tell me how to reach the Old Forest and the ancient castle of the Prince von der Tann.”

For a moment the two men whispered together, then the spokesman turned to Barney.

“We will lead you upon the right road. Come,” and the two turned their horses, one of them starting slowly back up the trail while the other remained waiting for Barney to pass him.

The American, suspecting nothing, voiced his thanks, and set out after him who had gone before. As he passed the fellow who waited the latter moved in behind him, so that Barney walked between the two. Occasionally the rider at his back turned in his saddle to scan the trail behind, as though still fearful that Barney had been lying to them and that he would discover a company of soldiers charging down upon them.

The trail became more and more difficult as they advanced, until Barney wondered how the little horses clung to the steep mountainside, where he himself had difficulty in walking without using his hand to keep from falling.

Twice the American attempted to break through the taciturnity of his guides, but his advances were met with nothing more than sultry grunts or silence, and presently a suspicion began to obtrude itself among his thoughts that possibly these “honest farmers” were something more sinister than they represented themselves to be.

A malign and threatening atmosphere seemed to surround them. Even the cat-like movement of their silent mounts breathed a sinister secrecy, and now, for the first time, Barney noticed the short, ugly looking carbines that were slung in boots at their saddle-horns. Then, promoted to further investigation, he dropped back beside the man who had been riding behind him, and as he did so he saw beneath the fellow's cloak the butts of two villainous-looking pistols.

As Barney dropped back beside him the man turned his mount across the narrow trail, and reining him in motioned Barney ahead.

"I have changed my mind," said the American, "about going to the Old Forest."

He had determined that he might as well have the thing out now as later, and discover at once how he stood with these two, and whether or not his suspicions of them were well grounded.

The man ahead had halted at the sound of Barney's voice, and swung about in the saddle.

"What's the trouble?" he asked.

"He don't want to go to the Old Forest," explained his companion, and for the first time Barney saw one of them grin. It was not at all a pleasant grin, nor reassuring.

"He don't, eh?" growled the other. "Well, he ain't goin', is he? Who ever said he was?"

And then he, too, laughed.

"I'm going back the way I came," said Barney, starting around the horse that blocked his way.

"No, you ain't," said the horseman. "You're goin' with us."

And Barney found himself gazing down the muzzle of one of the wicked looking pistols.

For a moment he stood in silence, debating mentally the wisdom of attempting to rush the fellow, and then, with a shake of his head, he turned back up the trail between his captors.

"Yes," he said, "on second thought I have decided to go with you. Your logic is most convincing."

## CHAPTER VI

### A KING'S RANSOM

**FOR** another mile the two brigands conducted their captor along the mountainside, then they turned into a narrow ravine near the summit of the hills — a deep, rocky, wooded ravine into whose black shadows it seemed the sun might never penetrate.

A winding path led crookedly among the pines that grew thickly in this sheltered hollow, until presently, after half an hour of rough going, they came upon a small natural clearing, rock-bound and impregnable.

As they filed from the wood Barney saw a score of villainous fellows clustered about a camp fire where they seemed engaged in cooking their noonday meal. Bits of meat were roasting upon iron skewers, and a great iron pot boiled vigorously at one side of the blaze.

At the sound of their approach the men sprang to their feet in alarm, and as many weapons as there were men leaped to view; but when they saw Barney's companions they returned their pistols to their holsters, and at sight of Barney they pressed forward to inspect the prisoner.

"Who have we here?" shouted a big blond giant, who affected extremely gaudy colors in his selection of wearing apparel, and whose pistols and knife had their grips heavily ornamented with pearl and silver.

"A stranger in Lutha he calls himself," replied one of Barney's captors. "But from the sword I take it he is one of old Peter's wolfhounds."

"Well, he's found the wolves at any rate," replied the giant, with a wide grin at his witticism. "And if Yellow Franz is the particular wolf you're after, my friend, why here I am," he concluded, addressing the American with a leer.

"I'm after no one," replied Barney. "I tell you I'm a stranger, and I lost my way in your infernal mountains. All I wish is to be set upon the right road to Tann, and if you will do that for me you



shall be well paid for your trouble.”

The giant, Yellow Franz, had come quite close to Barney and was inspecting him with an expression of considerable interest. Presently he drew a soiled and much-folded paper from his breast. Upon one side was a printed notice, and at the corners bits were torn away as though the paper had once been tacked upon wood, and then torn down without removing the tacks.

At sight of it Barney’s heart sank. The look of the thing was all too familiar. Before the yellow one had commenced to read aloud from it Barney had repeated to himself the words he knew were coming.

“Gray eyes,” read the brigand, “brown hair, and a full, reddish-brown beard.’ Herman and Friedrich, my dear children, you have stumbled upon the richest haul in all Lutha. Down upon your marrow-bones, you swine, and rub your low-born noses in the dirt before your king.”

The others looked their surprise.

“The king?” one cried.

“Behold!” cried Yellow Franz. “Leopold of Lutha!”

He waved a ham-like hand toward Barney.

Among the rough men was a young smooth-faced boy, and now with wide eyes he pressed forward to get a nearer view of the wonderful person of a king.

“Take a good look at him, Rudolph,” cried Yellow Franz. “It is the first and will probably be the last time you will ever see a king. Kings seldom visit the court of their fellow monarch, Yellow Franz of the Black Mountains.

“Come, my children, remove his majesty’s sword, lest he fall and stick himself upon it, and then prepare the royal chamber, seeing to it that it be made so comfortable that Leopold will remain with us a long time. Rudolph, fetch food and water for his majesty, and see to it that the silver plates and the golden goblets are well scoured and polished up.”

They conducted Barney to a miserable lean-to shack at one side of the clearing, and for a while the motley crew loitered about bandying coarse jests at the expense of the “king.” The boy,

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Rudolph, brought food and water, he alone of them all evincing the slightest respect or awe for the royalty of their unwilling guest.

After a time the men tired of the sport of king-baiting, for Barney showed neither rancor nor outraged majesty at their keenest thrusts, instead, often joining in the laugh with them at his own expense. They thought it odd that the king should hold his dignity in so low esteem, but that he was king they never doubted, attributing his denials to a disposition to deceive them, and rob them of the "king's ransom" they had already commenced to consider as their own.

Shortly after Barney arrived at the rendezvous he saw a messenger dispatched by Yellow Franz, and from the repeated gestures toward himself that had accompanied the giant's instructions to his emissary, Barney was positive that the man's errand had to do with him.

After the men had left his prison, leaving the boy standing awkwardly in wide-eyed contemplation of his august charge, the American ventured to open a conversation with his youthful keeper.

"Aren't you rather young to be starting in the bandit business, Rudolph?" asked Barney, who had taken a fancy to the youth.

"I do not want to be a bandit, your majesty," whispered the lad; "but my father owes Yellow Franz a great sum of money, and as he could not pay the debt Yellow Franz stole me from my home and says that he will keep me until my father pays him, and that if he does not pay he will make a bandit of me, and that then some day I shall be caught and hanged until I am dead."

"Can't you escape?" asked the young man. "It would seem to me that there would be many opportunities for you to get away undetected."

"There are, but I dare not. Yellow Franz says that if I run away he will be sure to come across me some day again and that then he will kill me."

Barney laughed.

"He is just talking, my boy," he said. "He thinks that by

frightening you he will be able to keep you from running away.”

“Your majesty does not know him,” whispered the youth, shuddering. “He is the wickedest man in all the world. Nothing would please him more than killing me, and he would have done it long since but for two things. One is that I have made myself useful about his camp, doing chores and the like, and the other is that were he to kill me he knows that my father would never pay him.”

“How much does your father owe him?”

“Five hundred marks, your majesty,” replied Rudolph. “Two hundred of this amount is the original debt, and the balance Yellow Franz has added since he captured me, so that it is really ransom money. But my father is a poor man, so that it will take a long time before he can accumulate so large a sum.”

“You would really like to go home again, Rudolph?”

“Oh, very much, your majesty, if I only dared.”

Barney was silent for some time, thinking. Possibly he could effect his own escape with the connivance of Rudolph, and at the same time free the boy. The paltry ransom he could pay out of his own pocket and send to Yellow Franz later, so that the youth need not fear the brigand’s revenge. It was worth thinking about, at any rate.

“How long do you imagine they will keep me, Rudolph?” he asked after a time.

“Yellow Franz has already sent Herman to Lustadt with a message for Prince Peter, telling him that you are being held for ransom, and demanding the payment of a huge sum for your release. Day after tomorrow or the next day he should return with Prince Peter’s reply.

“If it is favorable, arrangements will be made to turn you over to Prince Peter’s agents, who will have to come to some distant meeting place with the money. A week, perhaps, it will take, maybe longer.”

It was the second day before Herman returned from Lustadt. He rode in just at dark, his pony lathered from hard going.

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Barney and the boy saw him coming, and the youth ran forward with the others to learn the news that he had brought; but Yellow Franz and his messenger withdrew to a hut which the brigand chief reserved for his own use, nor would he permit any beside the messenger to accompany him to hear the report.

For half an hour Barney sat alone waiting for word from Yellow Franz that arrangements had been consummated for his release, and then out of the darkness came Rudolph, wide-eyed and trembling.

“Oh, my king?” he whispered. “What shall we do? Peter has refused to ransom you alive, but he has offered a great sum for unquestioned proof of your death. Already he has caused a proclamation to be issued stating that you have been killed by bandits after escaping from Blentz, and ordering a period of national mourning. In three weeks he is to be crowned king of Lutha.”

“When do they intend terminating my existence?” queried Barney.

There was a smile upon his lips, for even now he could scarce believe that in the twentieth century there could be any such medieval plotting against a king’s life, and yet, on second thought, had he not ample proof of the lengths to which Peter of Blentz was willing to go to obtain the crown of Lutha!

“I do not know, your majesty,” replied Rudolph, “when they will do it; but soon, doubtless, since the sooner it is done the sooner they can collect their pay.”

Further conversation was interrupted by the sound of footsteps without, and an instant later Yellow Franz entered the squalid apartment and the dim circle of light which flickered feebly from the smoky lantern that hung suspended from the rafters.

He stopped just within the doorway and stood eyeing the American with an ugly grin upon his vicious face. Then his eyes fell upon the trembling Rudolph.

“Get out of here, you!” he growled. “I’ve got private business with this king. And see that you don’t come nosing round

either, or I'll slit that soft throat for you."

Rudolph slipped past the burly ruffian, barely dodging a brutal blow aimed at him by the giant, and escaped into the darkness without.

"And now for you, my fine fellow," said the brigand, turning toward Barney. "Peter says you ain't worth nothing to him — alive; but that your dead body will fetch us a hundred thousand marks."

"Rather cheap for a king, isn't it?" was Barney's only comment.

"That's what Herman tells him," replied Yellow Franz. "But he's a close one, Peter is, and so it was that or nothing."

"When are you going to pull off this little — er — ah — royal demise?" asked Barney.

"If you mean when am I going to kill you," replied the bandit, "why, there ain't no particular rush about it. I'm a tender-hearted chap, I am. I never should have been in this business at all, but here I be, and as there ain't nobody that can do a better job of the kind than me, or do it so painlessly, why I just got to do it myself, and that's all there is to it. But, as I says, there ain't no great rush. If you want to pray, why, go ahead and pray. I'll wait for you."

"I don't remember," said Barney, "when I have met so generous a party as you, my friend. Your self-sacrificing magnanimity quite overpowers me. It reminds me of another unloved Robin Hood whom I once met. It was in front of Burket's coal-yard on Ella Street, back in dear old Beatrice, at some unchristian hour of the night.

"After he had relieved me of a dollar and forty cents he remarked: 'I gotta good mind to kick yer slats in fer not havin' more of de cush on yeh; but I'm feelin' so good about de last guy I stuck up I'll let youse off dis time.'"

"I do not know what you are talking about," replied Yellow Franz; "but if you want to pray you'd better hurry up about it."

He drew his pistol from its holster on the belt at his hips.

Now Barney Custer had no mind to give up the ghost

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without a struggle; but just how he was to overcome the great beast who confronted him with menacing pistol was, to say the least, not precisely plain. He wished the man would come a little nearer where he might have some chance to close with him before the fellow could fire. To gain time the American assumed a prayerful attitude, but kept one eye on the bandit.

Presently Yellow Franz showed indications of impatience. He fingered the trigger of his weapon, and then slowly raised it on a line with Barney's chest.

"Hadn't you better come closer?" asked the young man. "You might miss at that distance, or just wound me."

Yellow Franz grinned.

"I don't miss," he said, and then: "You're certainly a game one. If it wasn't for the hundred thousand marks, I'd be hanged if I'd kill you."

"The chances are that you will be if you do," said Barney, "so wouldn't you rather take one hundred and fifty thousand marks and let me make my escape?"

Yellow Franz looked at the speaker a moment through narrowed lids.

"Where would you find any one willing to pay that amount for a crazy king?" he asked.

"I have told you that I am not the king," said Barney. "I am an American with a father who would gladly pay that amount on my safe delivery to any American consul."

Yellow Franz shook his head and tapped his brow significantly.

"Even if you was what you are dreaming, it wouldn't pay me," he said.

"I'll make it two hundred thousand," said Barney.

"No — it's a waste of time talking about it. It's worth more than money to me to know that I'll always have this thing on Peter, and that when he's king he won't dare bother me for fear I'll publish the details of this little deal. Come, you must be through praying by this time. I can't wait around here all night." Again Yellow Franz raised his pistol toward Barney's heart.

Before the brigand could pull the trigger, or Barney hurl himself upon his would-be assassin, there was a flash and a loud report from the open window of the shack.

With a groan Yellow Franz crumpled to the dirt floor, and simultaneously Barney was upon him and had wrested the pistol from his hand; but the precaution was unnecessary for Yellow Franz would never again press finger to trigger. He was dead even before Barney reached his side.

In possession of the weapon, the American turned toward the window from which had come the rescuing shot, and as he did so he saw the boy, Rudolph, clambering over the sill, white-faced and trembling. In his hand was a smoking carbine, and on his brow great beads of cold sweat.

“God forgive me!” murmured the youth. “I have killed a man.”

“You have killed a dangerous wild beast, Rudolph,” said Barney, “and both God and your fellow man will thank and reward you.”

“I am glad that I killed him, though,” went on the boy, “for he would have killed you, my king, had I not done so. Gladly would I go to the gallows to save my king.”

“You are a brave lad, Rudolph,” said Barney, “and if ever I get out of the pretty pickle I’m in you’ll be well rewarded for your loyalty to Leopold of Lutha. After all,” thought the young man, “being a king has its redeeming features, for if the boy had not thought me his monarch he would never have risked the vengeance of the bloodthirsty brigands in this attempt to save me.”

“Hasten, your majesty,” whispered the boy, tugging at the sleeve of Barney’s jacket. “There is no time to be lost. We must be far away from here when the others discover that Yellow Franz has been killed.”

Barney stooped above the dead man, and removing his belt and cartridges transferred them to his own person. Then blowing out the lantern the two slipped out into the darkness of the night.

About the camp fire of the brigands the entire pack was congregated. They were talking together in low voices, ever and

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anon glancing expectantly toward the shack to which their chief had gone to dispatch the king. It is not every day that a king is murdered, and even these hardened cutthroats felt the spell of awe at the thought of what they believed the sharp report they had heard from the shack portended.

Keeping well to the far side of the clearing, Rudolph led Barney around the group of men and safely into the wood below them. From this point the boy followed the trail which Barney and his captors had traversed two days previously, until he came to a diverging ravine that led steeply up through the mountains upon their right hand.

In the distance behind them they suddenly heard, faintly, the shouting of men.

"They have discovered Yellow Franz," whispered the boy, shuddering.

"Then they'll be after us directly," said Barney.

"Yes, your majesty," replied Rudolph, "but in the darkness they will not see that we have turned up this ravine, and so they will ride on down the other. I have chosen this way because their horses cannot follow us here, and thus we shall be under no great disadvantage. It may be, however, that we shall have to hide in the mountains for a while, since there will be no place of safety for us between here and Lustadt until after the edge of their anger is dulled."

And such proved to be the case, for try as they would they found it impossible to reach Lustadt without detection by the brigands who patrolled every highway and byway from their rugged mountains to the capital of Lutha.

For nearly three weeks Barney and the boy hid in caves or dense underbrush by day, and by night sought some avenue which would lead them past the vigilant sentries that patrolled the ways to freedom.

Often they were wet by rains, nor were they ever in the warm sunlight for a sufficient length of time to become thoroughly dry and comfortable. Of food they had little, and of the poorest quality.



They dared not light a fire for warmth or cooking, and their plight was so miserable that, but for the boy's pitiful terror at the thought of being recaptured by the bandits, Barney would long since have made a break for Lustadt, depending upon their arms and ammunition to carry them safely through were they discovered by their enemies.

Rudolph had contracted a severe cold the first night, and now, it having settled upon his lungs, he had developed a persistent and aggravating cough that caused Barney not a little apprehension. When, after nearly three weeks of suffering and privation, it became clear that the boy's lungs were affected, the American decided to take matters into his own hands and attempt to reach Lustadt and a good doctor; but before he had an opportunity to put his plan into execution the entire matter was removed from his jurisdiction.

It happened like this: After a particularly fatiguing and uncomfortable night spent in attempting to elude the sentinels who blocked their way from the mountains, daylight found them near a little spring, and here they decided to rest for an hour before resuming their way.

The little pool lay not far from a clump of heavy bushes which would offer them excellent shelter, as it was Barney's intention to go into hiding as soon as they had quenched their thirst at the spring.

Rudolph was coughing pitifully, his slender frame wracked by the convulsion of each new attack. Barney had placed an arm about the boy to support him, for the paroxysms always left him very weak.

The young man's heart went out to the poor boy, and pangs of regret filled his mind as he realized that the child's pathetic condition was the direct result of his self-sacrificing attempt to save his king. Barney felt much like a murderer and a thief, and dreaded the time when the boy should be brought to a realization of his mistake.

He had come to feel a warm affection for the loyal little lad, who had suffered so uncomplainingly and whose every thought

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had been for the safety and comfort of his king.

Today, thought Barney, I'll take this child through to Lustadt even if every ragged brigand in Lutha lies between us and the capital; but even as he spoke a sudden crashing of underbrush behind caused him to wheel about, and there, not twenty paces from them, stood two of Yellow Franz's cutthroats.

At sight of Barney and the lad they gave voice to a shout of triumph, and raising their carbines fired point-blank at the two fugitives.

But Barney had been equally as quick with his own weapon, and at the moment that they fired he grasped Rudolph and dragged him backward to a great boulder behind which their bodies might be protected from the fire of their enemies.

Both the bullets of the bandits' first volley had been directed at Barney, for it was upon his head that the great price rested. They had missed him by a narrow margin, due, perhaps, to the fact that the mounts of the brigands had been prancing in alarm at the unexpected sight of the two strangers at the very moment that their riders attempted to take aim and fire.

But now they had ridden back into the brush and dismounted, and after hiding their ponies they came creeping out upon their bellies upon opposite sides of Barney's shelter.

The American saw that it would be an easy thing for them to pick him off if he remained where he was, and so with a word to Rudolph he sprang up and the boy with him. Each delivered a quick shot at the bandit nearest him, and then together they broke for the bushes in which the brigand's mounts were hidden.

Two shots answered theirs. Rudolph, who was ahead of Barney, stumbled and threw up his hands. He would have fallen had not the American thrown a strong arm about him.

"I'm shot, your majesty," murmured the boy, his head dropping against Barney's breast.

With the lad grasped close to him, the young man turned at the edge of the brush to meet the charge of the two ruffians. The wounding of the youth had delayed them just enough to preclude their making this temporary refuge in safety.

As Barney turned both the men fired simultaneously, and both missed. The American raised his revolver, and with the flash of it the foremost brigand came to a sudden stop. An expression of bewilderment crossed his features. He extended his arms straight before him, the revolver slipped from his grasp, and then like a dying top he pivoted once drunkenly and collapsed upon the turf.

At the instant of his fall his companion and the American fired point-blank at one another.

Barney felt a burning sensation in his shoulder, but it was forgotten for the moment in the relief that came to him as he saw the second rascal sprawl headlong upon his face. Then he turned his attention to the limp little figure that hung across his left arm.

Gently Barney laid the boy upon the sward, and fetching water from the pool bathed his face and forced a few drops between the white lips. The cooling draft revived the wounded child, but brought on a paroxysm of coughing. When this had subsided Rudolph raised his eyes to those of the man bending above him.

“Thank God, your majesty is unharmed,” he whispered. “Now I can die in peace.”

The white lids drooped lower, and with a tired sigh the boy lay quiet. Tears came to the young man’s eyes as he let the limp body gently to the ground.

“Brave little heart,” he murmured, “you gave up your life in the service of your king as truly as though you had not been all mistaken in the object of your veneration, and if it lies within the power of Barney Custer you shall not have died in vain.”

## CHAPTER VII

### THE REAL LEOPOLD

TWO hours later a horseman pushed his way between tumbled and tangled briars along the bottom of a deep ravine.

He was hatless, and his stained and ragged khaki betokened much exposure to the elements and hard and continued usage. At his saddle-bow a carbine swung in its boot, and upon either hip was strapped a long revolver. Ammunition in plenty filled the cross belts that he had looped about his shoulders.

Grim and warlike as were his trappings, no less grim was the set of his strong jaw or the glint of his gray eyes, nor did the patch of brown stain that had soaked through the left shoulder of his jacket tend to lessen the martial atmosphere which surrounded him. Fortunate it was for the brigands of the late Yellow Franz that none of them chanced in the path of Barney Custer that day.

For nearly two hours the man had ridden downward out of the high hills in search of a dwelling at which he might ask the way to Tann; but as yet he had passed but a single house, and that a long untenanted ruin. He was wondering what had become of all the inhabitants of Lutha when his horse came to a sudden halt before an obstacle which entirely blocked the narrow trail at the bottom of the ravine.

As the horseman's eyes fell upon the thing they went wide in astonishment, for it was no less than the charred remnants of the once beautiful gray roadster that had brought him into this twentieth century land of medieval adventure and intrigue. Barney saw that the machine had been lifted from where it had fallen across the horse of the Princess von der Tann, for the animal's decaying carcass now lay entirely clear of it; but why this should have been done, or by whom, the young man could not imagine.

A glance aloft showed him the road far above him, from which he, the horse and the roadster had catapulted; and with the sight of it there flashed to his mind the fair face of the young girl in whose service the thing had happened. Barney wondered if

Joseph had been successful in returning her to Tann, and he wondered, too, if she mourned for the man she had thought king — if she would be very angry should she ever learn the truth.

Then there came to the American's mind the figure of the shopkeeper of Tafelberg, and the fellow's evident loyalty to the mad king he had never seen. Here was one who might aid him, thought Barney. He would have the will, at least and with the thought the young man turned his pony's head diagonally up the steep ravine side.

It was a tough and dangerous struggle to the road above, but at last by dint of strenuous efforts on the part of the sturdy little beast the two finally scrambled over the edge of the road and stood once more upon level footing.

After breathing his mount for a few minutes Barney swung himself into the saddle again and set off toward Tafelberg. He met no one upon the road, nor within the outskirts of the village, and so he came to the door of the shop he sought without attracting attention.

Swinging to the ground he tied the pony to one of the supporting columns of the porch-roof and a moment later had stepped within the shop.

From a back room the shopkeeper presently emerged, and when he saw who it was that stood before him his eyes went wide in consternation.

"In the name of all the saints, your majesty," cried the old fellow, "what has happened? How comes it that you are out of the hospital, and travel-stained as though from a long, hard ride? I cannot understand it, sire."

"Hospital?" queried the young man. "What do you mean, my good fellow? I have been in no hospital."

"You were there only last evening when I inquired after you of the doctor," insisted the shopkeeper, "nor did any there yet suspect your true identity."

"Last evening I was hiding far up in the mountains from Yellow Franz's band of cutthroats," replied Barney. "Tell me what manner of riddle you are propounding."

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Then a sudden light of understanding flashed through Barney's mind.

"Man!" he exclaimed. "Tell me — you have found the true king? He is at a hospital in Tafelberg?"

"Yes, your majesty, I have found the true king, and it is so that he was at the Tafelberg sanatorium last evening. It was beside the remnants of your wrecked automobile that two of the men of Tafelberg found you.

"One leg was pinioned beneath the machine which was on fire when they discovered you. They brought you to my shop, which is the first on the road into town, and not guessing your true identity they took my word for it that you were an old acquaintance of mine and without more ado turned you over to my care."

Barney scratched his head in puzzled bewilderment. He began to doubt if he were in truth himself, or, after all, Leopold of Lutha. As no one but himself could, by the wildest stretch of imagination, have been in such a position, he was almost forced to the conclusion that all that had passed since the instant that his car shot over the edge of the road into the ravine had been but the hallucinations of a fever-excited brain, and that for the past three weeks he had been lying in a hospital cot instead of experiencing the strange and inexplicable adventures that he had believed to have befallen him.

But yet the more he thought of it the more ridiculous such a conclusion appeared, for it did not in the least explain the pony tethered without, which he plainly could see from where he stood within the shop, nor did it satisfactorily account for the blotch of blood upon his shoulder from a wound so fresh that the stain still was damp; nor for the sword which Joseph had buckled about his waist within Blentz's forbidding walls; nor for the arms and ammunition he had taken from the dead brigands — all of which he had before him as tangible evidence of the rationality of the past few weeks.

"My friend," said Barney at last, "I cannot wonder that you have mistaken me for the king, since all those I have met within

Lutha have leaped to the same error, though not one among them made the slightest pretense of ever having seen his majesty. A ridiculous beard started the trouble, and later a series of happenings, no one of which was particularly remarkable in itself, aggravated it, until but a moment since I myself was almost upon the point of believing that I am the king.

“But, my dear Herr Kramer, I am not the king; and when you have accompanied me to the hospital and seen that your patient still is there, you may be willing to admit that there is some justification for doubt as to my royalty.”

The old man shook his head.

“I am not so sure of that,” he said, “for he who lies at the hospital, providing you are not he, or he you, maintains as sturdily as do you that he is not Leopold. If one of you, whichever be king — providing that you are not one and the same, and that I be not the only maniac in the sad muddle — if one of you would but trust my loyalty and love for the true king and admit your identity, then I might be of some real service to that one of you who is really Leopold. *Herr Gott!* My words are as mixed as my poor brain.”

“If you will listen to me, Herr Kramer,” said Barney, “and believe what I tell you, I shall be able to unscramble your ideas in so far as they pertain to me and my identity. As to the man you say was found beneath my car, and who now lies in the sanatorium of Tafelberg, I cannot say until I have seen and talked with him. He may be the king and he may not; but if he insists that he is not, I shall be the last to wish a kingship upon him. I know from sad experience the hardships and burdens that the thing entails.”

Then Barney narrated carefully and in detail the principal events of his life, from his birth in Beatrice to his coming to Lutha upon pleasure. He showed Herr Kramer his watch with his monogram upon it, his seal ring, and inside the pocket of his coat the label of his tailor, with his own name written beneath it and the date that the garment had been ordered.

When he had completed his narrative the old man shook his head.

“I cannot understand it,” he said; “and yet I am almost

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forced to believe that you are not the king.”

“Direct me to the sanatorium,” suggested Barney, “and if it be within the range of possibility I shall learn whether the man who lies there is Leopold or another, and if he be the king I shall serve him as loyally as you would have served me. Together we may assist him to gain the safety of Tann and the protection of old Prince Ludwig.”

“If you are not the king,” said Kramer suspiciously, “why should you be so interested in aiding Leopold? You may even be an enemy. How can I know?”

“You cannot know, my good friend,” replied Barney. “But had I been an enemy, how much more easily might I have encompassed my designs, whatever they might have been, had I encouraged you to believe that I was king. The fact that I did not, must assure you that I have no ulterior designs against Leopold.”

This line of reasoning proved quite convincing to the old shopkeeper, and at last he consented to lead Barney to the sanatorium. Together they traversed the quiet village streets to the outskirts of the town, where in large, park-like grounds the well-known sanatorium of Tafelberg is situated in quiet surroundings. It is an institution for the treatment of nervous diseases to which patients are brought from all parts of Europe, and is doubtless Lutha’s principal claim upon the attention of the outer world.

As the two crossed the gardens which lay between the gate and the main entrance and mounted the broad steps leading to the veranda an old servant opened the door, and recognizing Herr Kramer, nodded pleasantly to him.

“Your patient seems much brighter this morning, Herr Kramer,” he said, “and has been asking to be allowed to sit up.”

“He is still here, then?” questioned the shopkeeper with a sigh that might have indicated either relief or resignation.

“Why, certainly. You did not expect that he had entirely recovered overnight, did you?”

“No,” replied Herr Kramer, “not exactly. In fact, I did not know what I should expect.”

As the two passed him on their way to the room in which the



patient lay, the servant eyed Herr Kramer in surprise, as though wondering what had occurred to his mentality since he had seen him the previous day. He paid no attention to Barney other than to bow to him as he passed, but there was another who did — an attendant standing in the hallway through which the two men walked toward the private room where one of them expected to find the real mad king of Lutha.

He was a dark-visaged fellow, sallow and small-eyed; and as his glance rested upon the features of the American a puzzled expression crossed his face. He let his gaze follow the two as they moved on up the corridor until they turned in at the door of the room they sought, then he followed them, entering an apartment next to that in which Herr Kramer's patient lay.

As Barney and the shopkeeper entered the small, white-washed room, the former saw upon the narrow iron cot the figure of a man of about his own height. The face that turned toward them as they entered was covered by a full, reddish-brown beard, and the eyes that looked up at them in troubled surprise were gray. Beyond these Barney could see no likenesses to himself; yet they were sufficient, he realized, to have deceived any who might have compared one solely to the printed description of the other.

At the doorway Kramer halted, motioning Barney within.

"It will be better if you talk with him alone," he said. "I am sure that before both of us he will admit nothing."

Barney nodded, and the shopkeeper of Tafelberg withdrew and closed the door behind him. The American approached the bedside with a cheery "Good morning."

The man returned the salutation with a slight inclination of his head. There was a questioning look in his eyes; but dominating that was a pitiful, hunted expression that touched the American's heart.

The man's left hand lay upon the coverlet. Barney glanced at the third finger. About it was a plain gold band. There was no royal ring of the kings of Lutha in evidence, yet that was no indication that the man was not Leopold; for were he the king and desirous of concealing his identity, his first act would be to remove

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every symbol of his kingship.

Barney took the hand in his.

"They tell me that you are well on the road to recovery," he said. "I am very glad that it is so."

"Who are you?" asked the man.

"I am Bernard Custer, an American. You were found beneath my car at the bottom of a ravine. I feel that I owe you full reparation for the injuries you received, though it is beyond me how you happened to be found under the machine. Unless I am truly mad, I was the only occupant of the roadster when it plunged over the embankment."

"It is very simple," replied the man upon the cot. "I chanced to be at the bottom of the ravine at the time and the car fell upon me."

"What were you doing at the bottom of the ravine?" asked Barney quite suddenly, after the manner of one who administers a third degree.

The man started and flushed with suspicion.

"That is my own affair," he said.

He tried to disengage his hand from Barney's, and as he did so the American felt something within the fingers of the other. For an instant his own fingers tightened upon those that lay within them, so that as the others were withdrawn his index finger pressed close upon the thing that had aroused his curiosity.

It was a large setting turned inward upon the third finger of the left hand. The gold band that Barney had seen was but the opposite side of the same ring.

A quick look of comprehension came to Barney's eyes. The man upon the cot evidently noted it and rightly interpreted its cause, for, having freed his hand, he now slipped it quickly beneath the coverlet.

"I have passed through a series of rather remarkable adventures since I came to Lutha," said Barney apparently quite irrelevantly, after the two had remained silent for a moment. "Shortly after my car fell upon you I was mistaken for the fugitive King Leopold by the young lady whose horse fell into the ravine

with my car. She is a most loyal supporter of the king, being none other than the Princess Emma von der Tann. From her I learned to espouse the cause of Leopold.”

Step by step Barney took the man through the adventures that had befallen him during the past three weeks, closing with the story of the death of the boy, Rudolph.

“Above his dead body I swore to serve Leopold of Lutha as loyally as the poor, mistaken child had served me, your majesty,” and Barney looked straight into the eyes of him who lay upon the little iron cot.

For a moment the man held his eyes upon those of the American, but finally, under the latter’s steady gaze, they dropped and wandered.

“Why do you address me as ‘your majesty’?” he asked irritably.

“With my forefinger I felt the ruby and the four wings of the setting of the royal ring of the kings of Lutha upon the third finger of your left hand,” replied Barney.

The king started up upon his elbow, his eyes wild with apprehension.

“It is not so,” he cried. “It is a lie! I am not the king.”

“Hush!” admonished Barney. “You have nothing to fear from me. There are good friends and loyal subjects in plenty to serve and protect your majesty, and place you upon the throne that has been stolen from you. I have sworn to serve you. The old shopkeeper, Herr Kramer, who brought me here, is an honest, loyal old soul. He would die for you, your majesty. Trust us. Let us help you. Tomorrow, Kramer tells me, Peter of Blentz is to have himself crowned as king in the cathedral at Lustadt.

“Will you sit supinely by and see another rob you of your kingdom, and then continue to rob and throttle your subjects as he has been doing for the past ten years? No, you will not. Even if you do not want the crown, you were born to the duties and obligations it entails, and for the sake of your people you must assume them now.”

“How am I to know that you are not another of the

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creatures of that fiend of Blentz?" cried the king. "How am I to know that you will not drag me back to the terrors of that awful castle, and to the poisonous potions of the new physician Peter has employed to assassinate me? I can trust none.

"Go away and leave me. I do not want to be king. I wish only to go away as far from Lutha as I can get and pass the balance of my life in peace and security. Peter may have the crown. He is welcome to it, for all of me. All I ask is my life and my liberty."

Barney saw that while the king was evidently of sound mind, his was not one of those iron characters and courageous hearts that would willingly fight to the death for his own rights and the rights and happiness of his people. Perhaps the long years of bitter disappointment and misery, the tedious hours of imprisonment, and the constant haunting fears for his life had reduced him to this pitiable condition.

Whatever the cause, Barney Custer was determined to overcome the man's aversion to assuming the duties which were rightly his, for in his memory were the words of Emma von der Tann, in which she had made plain to him the fate that would doubtless befall her father and his house were Peter of Blentz to become king of Lutha. Then, too, there was the life of the little peasant boy. Was that to be given up uselessly for a king with so mean a spirit that he would not take a scepter when it was forced upon him?

And the people of Lutha? Were they to be further and continually robbed and downtrodden beneath the heel of Peter's scoundrelly officials because their true king chose to evade the responsibilities that were his by birth?

For half an hour Barney pleaded and argued with the king, until he infused in the weak character of the young man a part of his own tireless enthusiasm and courage. Leopold commenced to take heart and see things in a brighter and more engaging light. Finally he became quite excited about the prospects, and at last Barney obtained a willing promise from him that he would consent to being placed upon his throne and would go to Lustadt at any time that Barney should come for him with a force from the

retainers of Prince Ludwig von der Tann.

“Let us hope,” cried the king, “that the luck of the reigning house of Lutha has been at last restored. Not since my aunt, the Princess Victoria, ran away with a foreigner has good fortune shone upon my house. It was when my father was still a young man — before he had yet come to the throne — and though his reign was marked with great peace and prosperity for the people of Lutha, his own private fortunes were most unhappy.

“My mother died at my birth, and the last days of my father’s life were filled with suffering from the cancer that was slowly killing him. Let us pray, Herr Custer, that you have brought new life to the fortunes of my house.”

“Amen, your majesty,” said Barney. “And now I’ll be off for Tann — there must not be a moment lost if we are to bring you to Lustadt in time for the coronation. Herr Kramer will watch over you, but as none here guesses your true identity you are safer here than anywhere else in Lutha. Good-bye, your majesty. Be of good heart. We’ll have you on the road to Lustadt and the throne tomorrow morning.”

After Barney Custer had closed the door of the king’s chamber behind him and hurried down the corridor, the door of the room next the king’s opened quietly and a dark-visaged fellow, sallow and small-eyed, emerged. Upon his lips was a smile of cunning satisfaction, as he hastened to the office of the medical director and obtained a leave of absence for twenty-four hours.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE CORONATION DAY

**TOWARD** dusk of the day upon which the mad king of Lutha had been found, a dust-covered horseman reined in before the great gate of the castle of Prince Ludwig von der Tann. The unsettled political conditions which overhung the little kingdom of Lutha were evident in the return to medievalism which the raised portcullis and the armed guard upon the barbican of the ancient feudal fortress revealed. Not for a hundred years before had these things been done other than as a part of the ceremonials of a fête day, or in honor of visiting royalty.

At the challenge from the gate Barney replied that he bore a message for the prince. Slowly the portcullis sank into position across the moat and an officer advanced to meet the rider.

“The prince has ridden to Lustadt with a large retinue,” he said, “to attend the coronation of Peter of Blentz tomorrow.”

“Prince Ludwig von der Tann has gone to attend the coronation of Peter!” cried Barney in amazement. “Has the Princess Emma returned from her captivity in the castle of Blentz?”

“She is with her father now, having returned nearly three weeks ago,” replied the officer, “and Peter has disclaimed responsibility for the outrage, promising that those responsible shall be punished. He has convinced Prince Ludwig that Leopold is dead, and for the sake of Lutha — to save her from civil strife — my prince has patched a truce with Peter; though unless I mistake the character of the latter and the temper of the former it will be short-lived.

“To demonstrate to the people,” continued the officer, “that Prince Ludwig and Peter are good friends, the great Von der Tann will attend the coronation, but that he takes little stock in the sincerity of the Prince of Blentz would be apparent could the latter have a peep beneath the cloaks and look into the loyal hearts of the men of Tann who rode down to Lustadt today.”

Barney did not wait to hear more. He was glad that in the gathering dusk the officer had not seen his face plainly enough to mistake him for the king. With a parting, "Then I must ride to Lustadt with my message for the prince," he wheeled his tired mount and trotted down the steep trail from Tann toward the highway which leads to the capital.

All night Barney rode. Three times he wandered from the way and was forced to stop at farmhouses to inquire the proper direction; but darkness hid his features from the sleepy eyes of those who answered his summons, and daylight found him still forging ahead in the direction of the capital of Lutha.

The American was sunk in unhappy meditation as his weary little mount plodded slowly along the dusty road. For hours the man had not been able to urge the beast out of a walk. The loss of time consequent upon his having followed wrong roads during the night and the exhaustion of the pony which retarded his speed to what seemed little better than a snail's pace seemed to assure the failure of his mission, for at best he could not reach Lustadt before noon.

There was no possibility of bringing Leopold to his capital in time for the coronation, and but a bare possibility that Prince Ludwig would accept the word of an entire stranger that Leopold lived, for the acknowledgment of such a condition by the old prince could result in nothing less than an immediate resort to arms by the two factions. It was certain that Peter would be infinitely more anxious to proceed with his coronation should it be rumored that Leopold lived, and equally certain that Prince Ludwig would interpose every obstacle, even to armed resistance, to prevent the consummation of the ceremony.

Yet there seemed to Barney no other alternative than to place before the king's one powerful friend the information that he had. It would then rest with Ludwig to do what he thought advisable.

An hour from Lustadt the road wound through a dense forest, whose pleasant shade was a grateful relief to both horse and rider from the hot sun beneath which they had been journeying

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the greater part of the morning. Barney was still lost in thought, his eyes bent forward, when at a sudden turning of the road he came face to face with a troop of horse that were entering the main highway at this point from an unfrequented byroad.

At sight of them the American instinctively wheeled his mount in an effort to escape, but at a command from an officer a half dozen troopers spurred after him, their fresh horses soon overtaking his jaded pony.

For a moment Barney contemplated resistance, for these were troopers of the Royal Horse, the body which was now Peter's most effective personal tool; but even as his hand slipped to the butt of one of the revolvers at his hip, the young man saw the foolish futility of such a course, and with a shrug and a smile he drew rein and turned to face the advancing soldiers.

As he did so the officer rode up, and at sight of Barney's face gave an exclamation of astonishment. The officer was Butzow.

"Well met, your majesty," he cried saluting. "We are riding to the coronation. We shall be just in time."

"To see Peter of Blentz rob Leopold of a crown," said the American in a disgusted tone.

"To see Leopold of Lutha come into his own, your majesty. Long live the king!" cried the officer.

Barney thought the man either poking fun at him because he was not the king, or, thinking he was Leopold, taking a mean advantage of his helplessness to bait him. Yet this last suspicion seemed unfair to Butzow, who at Blentz had given ample evidence that he was a gentleman, and of far different caliber from Maenck and the others who served Peter.

If he could but convince the man that he was no king and thus gain his liberty long enough to reach Prince Ludwig's ear, his mission would have been served in so far as it lay in his power to serve it. For some minutes Barney expended his best eloquence and logic upon the cavalry officer in an effort to convince him that he was not Leopold.

The king had given the American his great ring to safeguard for him until it should be less dangerous for Leopold to wear it,



and for fear that at the last moment someone within the sanatorium might recognize it and bear word to Peter of the king's whereabouts. Barney had worn it turned in upon the third finger of his left hand, and now he slipped it surreptitiously into his breeches pocket lest Butzow should see it and by it be convinced that Barney was indeed Leopold.

"Never mind who you are," cried Butzow, thinking to humor the king's strange obsession. "You look enough like Leopold to be his twin, and you must help us save Lutha from Peter of Blentz."

The American showed in his expression the surprise he felt at these words from an officer of the prince regent.

"You wonder at my change of heart?" asked Butzow.

"How can I do otherwise?"

"I cannot blame you," said the officer. "Yet I think that when you know the truth you will see that I have done only that which I believed to be the duty of a patriotic officer and a true gentleman."

They had rejoined the troop by this time, and the entire company was once more headed toward Lustadt. Butzow had commanded one of the troopers to exchange horses with Barney, bringing the jaded animal into the city slowly, and now freshly mounted the American was making better time toward his destination. His spirits rose, and as they galloped along the highway, he listened with renewed interest to the story which Lieutenant Butzow narrated in detail.

It seemed that Butzow had been absent from Lutha for a number of years as military attaché to the Luthanian legation at a foreign court. He had known nothing of the true condition at home until his return, when he saw such scoundrels as Coblich, Maenck, and Stein high in the favor of the prince regent. For some time before the events that had transpired after he had brought Barney and the Princess Emma to Blentz he had commenced to have his doubts as to the true patriotism of Peter of Blentz; and when he had learned through the unguarded words of Schonau that there was a real foundation for the rumor that the

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regent had plotted the assassination of the king his suspicions had crystallized into knowledge, and he had sworn to serve his king before all others — were he sane or mad. From this loyalty he could not be shaken.

“And what do you intend doing now?” asked Barney.

“I intend placing you upon the throne of your ancestors, sire,” replied Butzow; “nor will Peter of Blentz dare the wrath of the people by attempting to interpose any obstacle. When he sees Leopold of Lutha ride into the capital of his kingdom at the head of even so small a force as ours he will know that the end of his own power is at hand, for he is not such a fool that he does not perfectly realize that he is the most cordially hated man in all Lutha, and that only those attend upon him who hope to profit through his success or who fear his evil nature.”

“If Peter is crowned today,” asked Barney, “will it prevent Leopold regaining his throne?”

“It is difficult to say,” replied Butzow; “but the chances are that the throne would be lost to him forever. To regain it he would have to plunge Lutha into a bitter civil war, for once Peter is proclaimed king he will have the law upon his side, and with the resources of the State behind him — the treasury and the army — he will feel in no mood to relinquish the scepter without a struggle. I doubt much that you will ever sit upon your throne, sire, unless you do so within the very next hour.”

For some time Barney rode in silence. He saw that only by a master stroke could the crown be saved for the true king. Was it worth it? The man was happier without a crown. Barney had come to believe that no man lived who could be happy in possession of one. Then there came before his mind's eye the delicate, patrician face of Emma von der Tann.

Would Peter of Blentz be true to his new promises to the house of Von der Tann? Barney doubted it. He recalled all that it might mean of danger and suffering to the girl whose kisses he still felt upon his lips as though it had been but now that hers had placed them there. He recalled the limp little body of the boy, Rudolph, and the Spartan loyalty with which the little fellow had

given his life in the service of the man he had thought king. The pitiful figure of the fear-haunted man upon the iron cot at Tafelberg rose before him and cried for vengeance.

To this man was the woman he loved betrothed! He knew that he might never wed the Princess Emma. Even were she not promised to another, the iron shackles of convention and age-old customs must forever separate her from an untitled American. But if he couldn't have her he still could serve her!

"For her sake," he muttered.

"Did your majesty speak?" asked Butzow.

"Yes, lieutenant. We urge greater haste, for if we are to be crowned today we have no time to lose."

Butzow smiled a relieved smile. The king had at last regained his senses!

Within the ancient cathedral at Lustadt a great and gorgeously attired assemblage had congregated. All the nobles of Lutha were gathered there with their wives, their children, and their retainers. There were the newer nobility of the lowlands — many whose patents dated but since the regency of Peter — and there were the proud nobility of the highlands — the old nobility of which Prince Ludwig von der Tann was the chief.

It was noticeable that though a truce had been made between Ludwig and Peter, yet the former chancellor of the kingdom did not stand upon the chancel with the other dignitaries of the State and court.

Few there were who knew that he had been invited to occupy a place of honor there, and had replied that he would take no active part in the making of any king in Lutha whose veins did not pulse to the flow of the blood of the house in whose service he had grown gray.

Close packed were the retainers of the old prince so that their great number was scarcely noticeable, though quite so was the fact that they kept their cloaks on, presenting a somber appearance in the midst of all the glitter of gold and gleam of jewels that surrounded them — a grim, business-like appearance

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that cast a chill upon Peter of Blentz as his eyes scanned the multitude of faces below him.

He would have shown his indignation at this seeming affront had he dared; but until the crown was safely upon his head and the royal scepter in his hand Peter had no mind to do aught that might jeopardize the attainment of the power he had sought for the past ten years.

The solemn ceremony was all but completed; the Bishop of Lustadt had received the great golden crown from the purple cushion upon which it had been borne at the head of the procession which accompanied Peter up the broad center aisle of the cathedral. He had raised it above the head of the prince regent, and was repeating the solemn words which precede the placing of the golden circlet upon the man's brow. In another moment Peter of Blentz would be proclaimed the king of Lutha.

By her father's side stood Emma von der Tann. Upon her haughty, high-bred face there was no sign of the emotions which ran riot within her fair bosom. In the act that she was witnessing she saw the eventual ruin of her father's house. That Peter would long want for an excuse to break and humble his ancient enemy she did not believe; but this was not the only cause for the sorrow that overwhelmed her.

Her most poignant grief, like that of her father, was for the dead king, Leopold; but to the sorrow of the loyal subject was added the grief of the loving woman, bereft. Close to her heart she hugged the memory of the brief hours spent with the man whom she had been taught since childhood to look upon as her future husband, but for whom the all-consuming fires of love had only been fanned to life within her since that moment, now three weeks gone, that he had crushed her to his breast to cover her lips with kisses for the short moment ere he sacrificed his life to save her from a fate worse than death.

Before her stood the Nemesis of her dead king. The last act of the hideous crime against the man she had loved was nearing its close. As the crown, poised over the head of Peter of Blentz, sank slowly downward the girl felt that she could scarce restrain her

desire to shriek aloud a protest against the wicked act — the crowning of a murderer king of her beloved Lutha.

A glance at the old man at her side showed her the stern, commanding features of her sire molded in an expression of haughty dignity; only the slight movement of the muscles of the strong jaw revealed the tensivity of the hidden emotions of the stern old warrior. He was meeting disappointment and defeat as a Von der Tann should — brave to the end.

The crown had all but touched the head of Peter of Blentz when a sudden commotion at the back of the cathedral caused the bishop to look up in ill-concealed annoyance. At the sight that met his eyes his hands halted in mid-air.

The great audience turned as one toward the doors at the end of the long central aisle. There, through the wide-swung portals, they saw mounted men forcing their way into the cathedral. The great horses shouldered aside the foot-soldiers that attempted to bar their way, and twenty troopers of the Royal Horse thundered to the very foot of the chancel steps.

At their head rode Lieutenant Butzow and a tall young man in soiled and tattered khaki, whose gray eyes and full reddish-brown beard brought an exclamation from Captain Maenck who commanded the guard about Peter of Blentz.

“*Mein Gott* — the king!” cried Maenck, and at the words Peter went white.

In open-mouthed astonishment the spectators saw the hurrying troopers and heard Butzow’s “The king! The king! Make way for Leopold, King of Lutha!”

And a girl saw, and as she saw her heart leaped to her mouth. Her small hand gripped the sleeve of her father’s coat. “The king, father,” she cried. “It is the king.”

Old Von der Tann, the light of a new hope firing his eyes, threw aside his cloak and leaped to the chancel steps beside Butzow and the others who were mounting them. Behind him a hundred cloaks dropped from the shoulders of his fighting men, exposing not silks and satins and fine velvet, but the coarse tan of khaki, and grim cartridge belts well filled, and stern revolvers

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slung to well-worn service belts.

As Butzow and Barney stepped upon the chancel Peter of Blentz leaped forward. "What mad treason is this?" he fairly screamed.

"The days of treason are now past, prince," replied Butzow meaningly. "Here is not treason, but Leopold of Lutha come to claim his crown which he inherited from his father."

"It is a plot," cried Peter, "to place an impostor upon the throne! This man is not the king."

For a moment there was silence. The people had not taken sides as yet. They awaited a leader. Old Von der Tann scrutinized the American closely.

"How may we know that you are Leopold?" he asked. "For ten years we have not seen our king."

"The governor of Blentz has already acknowledged his identity," cried Butzow. "Maenck was the first to proclaim the presence of the putative king."

At that someone near the chancel cried: "Long live Leopold, king of Lutha!" and at the words the whole assemblage raised their voices in a tumultuous: "Long live the king!"

Peter of Blentz turned toward Maenck. "The guard!" he cried. "Arrest those traitors, and restore order in the cathedral. Let the coronation proceed."

Maenck took a step toward Barney and Butzow, when old Prince von der Tann interposed his giant frame with grim resolve.

"Hold!" He spoke in a low, stern voice that brought the cowardly Maenck to a sudden halt.

The men of Tann had pressed eagerly forward until they stood, with bared swords, a solid rank of fighting men in grim semicircle behind their chief. There were cries from different parts of the cathedral of: "Crown Leopold, our true king! Down with Peter! Down with the assassin!"

"Enough of this," cried Peter. "Clear the cathedral!"

He drew his own sword, and with half a hundred loyal retainers at his back pressed forward to clear the chancel. There was a brief fight, from which Barney, much to his disgust, was

barred by the mighty figure of the old prince and the stalwart sword-arm of Butzow. He did get one crack at Maenck, and had the satisfaction of seeing blood spurt from a flesh-wound across the fellow's cheek.

"That for the Princess Emma," he called to the governor of Blentz, and then men crowded between them and he did not see the captain again during the battle.

When Peter saw that more than half of the palace guard were shouting for Leopold, and fighting side by side with the men of Tann, he realized the futility of further armed resistance at this time. Slowly he withdrew, and at last the fighting ceased and some semblance of order was restored within the cathedral.

Fearfully, the bishop emerged from hiding, his robes disheveled and his miter askew. Butzow grasped him none too reverently by the arm and dragged him before Barney. The crown of Lutha dangled in the priest's palsied hands.

"Crown the king!" cried the lieutenant. "Crown Leopold, king of Lutha!"

A mad roar of acclaim greeted this demand, and again from all parts of the cathedral rose the same wild cry. But in the lull that followed there were some who demanded proof of the tattered young man who stood before them and claimed that he was king.

"Let Prince Ludwig speak!" cried a dozen voices.

"Yes, Prince Ludwig! Prince Ludwig!" took up the throng.

Prince Ludwig von der Tann turned toward the bearded young man. Silence fell upon the crowded cathedral. Peter of Blentz stood awaiting the outcome, ready to demand the crown upon the first indication of wavering belief in the man he knew was not Leopold.

"How may we know that you are really Leopold?" again asked Ludwig of Barney.

The American raised his left hand, upon the third finger of which gleamed the great ruby of the royal ring of the kings of Lutha. Even Peter of Blentz started back in surprise as his eyes fell upon the ring.

Where had the man come upon it?

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Prince von der Tann dropped to one knee before Mr. Bernard Custer of Beatrice, Nebraska, U.S.A., and lifted that gentleman's hand to his lips, and as the people of Lutha saw the act they went mad with joy.

Slowly Prince Ludwig rose and addressed the bishop. "Leopold, the rightful heir to the throne of Lutha, is here. Let the coronation proceed."

The quiet of the sepulcher fell upon the assemblage as the holy man raised the crown above the head of the king. Barney saw from the corner of his eye the sea of faces upturned toward him. He saw the relief and happiness upon the stern countenance of the old prince.

He hated to dash all their new found joy by the announcement that he was not the king. He could not do that, for the moment he did Peter would step forward and demand that his own coronation continue. How was he to save the throne for Leopold?

Among the faces beneath him he suddenly descried that of a beautiful young girl whose eyes, filled with the tears of a great happiness and a greater love, were upturned to his. To reveal his true identity would lose him this girl forever. None save Peter knew that he was not the king. All save Peter would hail him gladly as Leopold of Lutha. How easily he might win a throne and the woman he loved by a moment of seeming passive compliance.

The temptation was great, and then he recalled the boy, lying dead for his king in the desolate mountains, and the pathetic light in the eyes of the sorrowful man at Tafelberg, and the great trust and confidence in the heart of the woman who had shown that she loved him.

Slowly Barney Custer raised his palm toward the bishop in a gesture of restraint.

"There are those who doubt that I am king," he said. "In these circumstances there should be no coronation in Lutha until all doubts are allayed and all may unite in accepting without question the royal right of the true Leopold to the crown of his father. Let the coronation wait, then, until another day, and all



will be well.”

“It must take place before noon of the fifth day of November, or not until a year later,” said Prince Ludwig. “In the meantime the Prince Regent must continue to rule. For the sake of Lutha the coronation must take place today, your majesty.”

“What is the date?” asked Barney.

“The third, sire.”

“Let the coronation wait until the fifth.”

“But your majesty,” interposed Von der Tann, “all may be lost in two days.”

“It is the king’s command,” said Barney quietly.

“But Peter of Blentz will rule for these two days, and in that time with the army at his command there is no telling what he may accomplish,” insisted the old man.

“Peter of Blentz shall not rule Lutha for two days, or two minutes,” replied Barney. “We shall rule. Lieutenant Butzow, you may place Prince Peter, Coblich, Maenck, and Stein under arrest. We charge them with treason against their king, and conspiring to assassinate their rightful monarch.”

Butzow smiled as he turned with his troopers at his back to execute this most welcome of commissions; but in a moment he was again at Barney’s side.

“They have fled, your majesty,” he said. “Shall I ride to Blentz after them?”

“Let them go,” replied the American, and then, with his retinue about him the new king of Lutha passed down the broad aisle of the cathedral of Lustadt and took his way to the royal palace between ranks of saluting soldiery backed by cheering thousands.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE KING'S GUESTS

ONCE within the palace Barney sought the seclusion of a small room off the audience chamber. Here he summoned Butzow.

"Lieutenant," said the American, "for the sake of a woman, a dead child and an unhappy king I have become dictator of Lutha for forty-eight hours; but at noon upon the fifth this farce must cease. Then we must place the true Leopold upon the throne, or a new dictator must replace me.

"In vain I have tried to convince you that I am not the king, and today in the cathedral so great was the temptation to take advantage of the odd train of circumstances that had placed a crown within my reach that I all but surrendered to it — not for the crown of gold, Butzow, but for an infinitely more sacred diadem which belongs to him to whom by right of birth and lineage, belongs the crown of Lutha. I do not ask you to understand — it is not necessary — but this you must know and believe: that I am not Leopold, and that the true Leopold lies in hiding in the sanatorium at Tafelberg, from which you and I, Butzow, must fetch him to Lustadt before noon on the fifth."

"But, sire —" commenced Butzow, when Barney raised his hand.

"Enough of that, Butzow!" he cried almost irritably. "I am sick of being 'sired' and 'majestied' — my name is Custer. Call me that when others are not present. Believe what you will, but ride with me in secrecy to Tafelberg tonight, and together we shall bring back Leopold of Lutha. Then we may call Prince Ludwig into our confidence, and none need ever know of the substitution.

"I doubt if many had a sufficiently close view of me today to realize the trick that I have played upon them, and if they note a difference they will attribute it to the change in apparel, for we shall see to it that the king is fittingly garbed before we exhibit him to his subjects, while hereafter I shall continue in khaki, which becomes me better than ermine."

Butzow shook his head.

“King or dictator,” he said, “it is all the same, and I must obey whatever commands you see fit to give, and so I will ride to Tafelberg tonight, though what we shall find there I cannot imagine, unless there are two Leopolds of Lutha. But shall we also find another royal ring upon the finger of this other king?”

Barney smiled. “You’re a typical hard-headed Dutchman, Butzow,” he said.

The lieutenant drew himself up haughtily. “I am not a Dutchman, your majesty. I am a Luthanian.”

Barney laughed. “Whatever else you may be, Butzow, you’re a brick,” he said, laying his hand upon the other’s arm.

Butzow looked at him narrowly.

“From your speech,” he said, “and the occasional Americanisms into which you fall I might believe that you were other than the king but for the ring.”

“It is my commission from the king,” replied Barney. “Leopold placed it upon my finger in token of his royal authority to act in his behalf. Tonight, then Butzow, you and I shall ride to Tafelberg. Have three good horses. We must lead one for the king.”

Butzow saluted and left the apartment. For an hour or two the American was busy with tailors whom he had ordered sent to the palace to measure him for the numerous garments of a royal wardrobe, for he knew the king to be near enough his own size that he might easily wear clothes that had been fitted to Barney; and it was part of his plan to have everything in readiness for the substitution which was to take place the morning of the coronation.

Then there were foreign dignitaries, and the heads of numerous domestic and civic delegations to be given audience. Old Von der Tann stood close behind Barney prompting him upon the royal duties that had fallen so suddenly upon his shoulders, and none thought it strange that he was unfamiliar with the craft of kingship, for was it not common knowledge that he had been kept a close prisoner in Blentz since boyhood, nor been

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given any coaching for the duties Peter of Blentz never intended he should perform?

After it was all over Prince Ludwig's grim and leathery face relaxed into a smile of satisfaction.

"None who witnessed the conduct of your first audience, sire," he said, "could for a moment doubt your royal lineage — if ever a man was born to kingship, your majesty, it be you."

Barney smiled, a bit ruefully, however, for in his mind's eye he saw a future moment when the proud old Prince von der Tann would know the truth of the imposture that had been played upon him, and the young man foresaw that he would have a rather unpleasant half-hour.

At a little distance from them Barney saw Emma von der Tann surrounded by a group of officials and palace officers. Since he had come to Lustadt that day he had had no word with her, and now he crossed toward her, amused as the throng parted to form an aisle for him, the men saluting and the women curtsying low.

He took both of the girl's hands in his, and, drawing one through his arm, took advantage of the prerogatives of kingship to lead her away from the throng of courtiers.

"I thought that I should never be done with all the tiresome business which seems to devolve upon kings," he said, laughing. "All the while that I should have been bending my royal intellect to matters of state, I was wondering just how a king might find a way to see the woman he loves without interruptions from the horde that dogs his footsteps."

"You seem to have found a way, Leopold," she whispered, pressing his arm close to her. "Kings usually do."

"It is not because I am a king that I found a way, Emma," he replied. "It is because I am an American."

She looked up at him with an expression of pleading in her eyes.

"Why do you persist?" she cried. "You have come into your own, and there is no longer aught to fear from Peter or any other. To me at least, it is most unkind still to deny your identity."

"I wonder," said Barney, "if your love could withstand the

knowledge that I am not the king.”

“It is the *man* I love, Leopold,” the girl replied.

“You think so now,” he said, “but wait until the test comes, and when it does, remember that I have always done my best to undeceive you. I know that you are not for such as I, my princess, and when I have returned your true king to you all that I shall ask is that you be happy with him.”

“I shall always be happy with my king,” she whispered, and the look that she gave him made Barney Custer curse the fate that had failed to make him a king by birth.

An hour later darkness had fallen upon the little city of Lustadt, and from a small gateway in the rear of the palace grounds two horsemen rode out into the ill-paved street and turned their mounts’ heads toward the north. At the side of one trotted a led horse.

As they passed beneath the glare of an arc-light before a café at the side of the public square, a diner sitting at a table upon the walk spied the tall figure and the bearded face of him who rode a few feet in advance of his companion. Leaping to his feet the man waved his napkin above his head.

“Long live the king!” he cried. “God save Leopold of Lutha!”

And amid the din of cheering that followed, Barney Custer of Beatrice and Lieutenant Butzow of the Royal Horse rode out into the night upon the road to Tafelberg.

When Peter of Blentz had escaped from the cathedral he had hastily mounted with a handful of his followers and hurried out of Lustadt along the road toward his formidable fortress at Blentz. Half way upon the journey he had met a dusty and travel-stained horseman hastening toward the capital city that Peter and his lieutenants had just left.

At sight of the prince regent the fellow reined in and saluted.

“May I have a word in private with your highness?” he asked. “I have news of the greatest importance for your ears alone.”

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Peter drew to one side with the man.

“Well,” he asked, “and what news have you for Peter of Blentz?”

The man leaned from his horse close to Peter’s ear.

“The king is in Tafelberg, your highness,” he said.

“The king is dead,” snapped Peter. “There is an impostor in the palace at Lustadt. But the real Leopold of Lutha was slain by Yellow Franz’s band of brigands weeks ago.”

“I heard the man at Tafelberg tell another that he was the king,” insisted the fellow. “Through the keyhole of his room I saw him take a great ring from his finger — a ring with a mighty ruby set in its center — and give it to the other. Both were bearded men with gray eyes — either might have passed for the king by the description upon the placards that have covered Lutha for the past month. At first he denied his identity, but when the other had convinced him that he sought only the king’s welfare he at last admitted that he was Leopold.”

“Where is he now?” cried Peter.

“He is still in the sanatorium at Tafelberg. In room twenty-seven. The other promised to return for him and take him to Lustadt, but when I left Tafelberg he had not yet done so, and if you hasten you may reach there before they take him away, and if there be any reward for my loyalty to you, prince, my name is Ferrath.”

“Ride with us and if you have told the truth, fellow, there shall be a reward and if not — then there shall be deserts,” and Peter of Blentz wheeled his horse and with his company galloped on toward Tafelberg.

As he rode he talked with his lieutenants Coblich, Maenck, and Stein, and among them it was decided that it would be best that Peter stop at Blentz for the night while the others rode on to Tafelberg.

“Do not bring Leopold to Blentz,” directed Peter, “for if it be he who lies at Tafelberg and they find him gone it will be toward Blentz that they will first look. Take him —”

The Regent leaned from his saddle so that his mouth was

close to the ear of Coblich, that none of the troopers might hear.

Coblich nodded his head.

“And, Coblich, the fewer that ride to Tafelberg tonight the surer the success of the mission. Take Maenck, Stein and one other with you. I shall keep this man with me, for it may prove but a plot to lure me to Tafelberg.”

Peter scowled at the now frightened hospital attendant.

“Tomorrow I shall be riding through the lowlands, Coblich, and so you may not find means to communicate with me, but before noon of the fifth have word at your town house in Lustadt for me of the success of your venture.”

They had reached the point now where the road to Tafelberg branches from that to Blentz, and the four who were to fetch the king wheeled their horses into the left-hand fork and cantered off upon their mission.

The direct road between Lustadt and Tafelberg is but little more than half the distance of that which Coblich and his companions had to traverse because of the wide detour they had made by riding almost to Blentz first, and so it was that when they cantered into the little mountain town near midnight Barney Custer and Lieutenant Butzow were but a mile or two behind them.

Had the latter had even the faintest of suspicions that the identity of the hiding place of the king might come to the knowledge of Peter of Blentz they could have reached Tafelberg ahead of Coblich and his party, but all unsuspecting they rode slowly to conserve the energy of their mounts for the return trip.

In silence the two men approached the grounds surrounding the sanatorium. In the soft dirt of the road the hoofs of their mounts made no sound, and the shadows of the trees that border the front of the enclosure hid them from the view of the trooper who held four riderless horses in a little patch of moonlight that broke through the opening in the trees at the main gate of the institution.

Barney was the first to see the animals and the man.

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“*S-s-st,*” he hissed, reining in his horse.

Butzow drew alongside the American.

“What can it mean?” asked Barney. “That fellow is a trooper, but I cannot make out his uniform.”

“Wait here,” said Butzow, and slipping from his horse he crept closer to the man, hugging the dense shadows close to the trees.

Barney reined in nearer the low wall. From his saddle he could see the grounds beyond through the branches of a tree. As he looked his attention was suddenly riveted upon a sight that sent his heart into his throat.

Three men were dragging a struggling, half-naked figure down the gravel walk from the sanatorium toward the gate. One kept a hand clapped across the mouth of the prisoner, who struck and fought his assailants with all the frenzy of despair.

Barney leaped from his saddle and ran headlong after Butzow. The lieutenant had reached the gate but an instant ahead of him when the trooper, turning suddenly at some slight sound of the officer’s foot upon the ground, detected the man creeping upon him. In an instant the fellow had whipped out a revolver, and raising it fired point-blank at Butzow’s chest; but in the same instant a figure shot out of the shadows beside him, and with the report of the revolver a heavy fist caught the trooper on the side of the chin, crumpling him to the ground as if he were dead.

The blow had been in time to deflect the muzzle of the firearm, and the bullet whistled harmlessly past the lieutenant.

“Your majesty!” exclaimed Butzow excitedly. “Go back. He might have killed you.”

Barney leaped to the other’s side and grasping him by the shoulders wheeled him about so that he faced the gate.

“There, Butzow,” he cried, “there is your king, and from the looks of it he never needed a loyal subject more than he does this moment. Come!” Without waiting to see if the other followed him, Barney Custer leaped through the gate full in the faces of the astonished trio that was dragging Leopold of Lutha from his sanctuary.



At sight of the American the king gave a muffled cry of relief, and then Barney was upon those who held him. A stinging uppercut lifted Coblich clear of the ground to drop him, dazed and bewildered, at the foot of the monarch he had outraged. Maenck drew a revolver only to have it struck from his hand by the sword of Butzow, who had followed closely upon the American's heels.

Barney, seizing the king by the arm, started on a run for the gateway. In his wake came Butzow with a drawn sword beating back Stein, who was armed with a cavalry saber, and Maenck who had now drawn his own sword.

The American saw that the two were pressing Butzow much too closely for safety and that Coblich had now recovered from the effects of the blow and was in pursuit, drawing his saber as he ran. Barney thrust the king behind him and turned to face the enemy, at Butzow's side.

The three men rushed upon the two who stood between them and their prey. The moonlight was now full in the faces of Butzow and the American. For the first time Maenck and the others saw who it was that had interrupted them.

"The impostor!" cried the governor of Blentz. "The false king!"

Imbued with temporary courage by the knowledge that his side had the advantage of superior numbers he launched himself full upon the American. To his surprise he met a sword-arm that none might have expected in an American, for Barney Custer had been a pupil of the redoubtable Colonel Monstery, who was, as Barney was wont to say, "one of the than-whomest of fencing masters."

Quickly Maenck fell back to give place to Stein, but not before the American's point had found him twice to leave him streaming blood from two deep flesh wounds.

Neither of those who fought in the service of the king saw the trembling, weak-kneed figure, which had stood behind them, turn and scurry through the gateway, leaving the men who battled for him to their fate.

The trooper whom Barney had felled had regained

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consciousness and as he came to his feet rubbing his swollen jaw he saw a disheveled, half-dressed figure running toward him from the sanatorium grounds. The fellow was no fool, and knowing the purpose of the expedition as he did he was quick to jump to the conclusion that this fleeing personification of abject terror was Leopold of Lutha; and so it was that as the king emerged from the gateway in search of freedom he ran straight into the widespread arms of the trooper.

Maenck and Coblich had seen the king's break for liberty, and the latter maneuvered to get himself between Butzow and the open gate that he might follow after the fleeing monarch.

At the same instant Maenck, seeing that Stein was being worsted by the American, rushed in upon the latter, and thus relieved, the rat-faced doctor was enabled to swing a heavy cut at Barney which struck him a glancing blow upon the head, sending him stunned and bleeding to the sward.

Coblich and the governor of Blentz hastened toward the gate, pausing for an instant to overwhelm Butzow. In the fierce scrimmage that followed the lieutenant was over-thrown, though not before his sword had passed through the heart of the rat-faced one. Deserting their fallen comrade the two dashed through the gate, where to their immense relief they found Leopold safe in the hands of the trooper.

An instant later the precious trio, with Leopold upon the horse of the late Dr. Stein, were galloping swiftly into the darkness of the wood that lies at the outskirts of Tafelberg.

When Barney regained consciousness he found himself upon a cot within the sanatorium. Close beside him lay Butzow, and above them stood an interne and several nurses. No sooner had the American regained his scattered wits than he leaped to the floor. The interne and the nurses tried to force him back upon the cot, thinking that he was in the throes of a delirium, and it required his best efforts to convince them that he was quite rational.

During the *mêlée* Butzow regained consciousness; his wound being as superficial as that of the American, the two men

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were soon donning their clothing, and, half-dressed, rushing toward the outer gate.

The interne had told them that when he had reached the scene of the conflict in company with the gardener he had found them and another lying upon the sward.

Their companion, he said, was quite dead.

“That must have been Stein,” said Butzow. “And the others had escaped with the king!”

“The king?” cried the interne.

“Yes, the king, man — Leopold of Lutha. Did you not know that he who has lain here for three weeks was the king?” replied Butzow.

The interne accompanied them to the gate and beyond, but everywhere was silence. The king was gone.

## CHAPTER X

### ON THE BATTLEFIELD

**ALL** that night and the following day Barney Custer and his aide rode in search of the missing king.

They came to Blentz, and there Butzow rode boldly into the great court, admitted by virtue of the fact that the guard upon the gate knew him only as an officer of the royal guard whom they believed still loyal to Peter of Blentz.

The lieutenant learned that the king was not there, nor had he been since his escape. He also learned that Peter was abroad in the lowland recruiting followers to aid him forcibly to regain the crown of Lutha.

The lieutenant did not wait to hear more, but, hurrying from the castle, rode to Barney where the latter had remained in hiding in the wood below the moat — the same wood through which he had stumbled a few weeks previously after his escape from the stagnant waters of the moat.

“The king is not here,” said Butzow to him, as soon as the former reached his side. “Peter is recruiting an army to aid him in seizing the palace at Lustadt, and king or no king, we must ride for the capital in time to check that move. Thank God,” he added, “that we shall have a king to place upon the throne of Lutha at noon tomorrow in spite of all that Peter can do.”

“What do you mean?” asked Barney. “Have you any clue to the whereabouts of Leopold?”

“I saw the man at Tafelberg whom you say is king,” replied Butzow. “I saw him tremble and whimper in the face of danger. I saw him run when he might have seized something, even a stone, and fought at the sides of the men who were come to rescue him. And I saw you there also.

“The truth and the falsity of this whole strange business is beyond me, but this I know: if you are not the king today I pray God that the other may not find his way to Lustadt before noon tomorrow, for by then a brave man will sit upon the throne of

Lutha, your majesty.”

Barney laid his hand upon the shoulder of the other.

“It cannot be, my friend,” he said. “There is more than a throne at stake for me, but to win them both I could not do the thing you suggest. If Leopold of Lutha lives he must be crowned tomorrow.”

“And if he does not live?” asked Butzow.

Barney Custer shrugged his shoulders.

It was dusk when the two entered the palace grounds in Lustadt. The sight of Barney threw the servants and functionaries of the royal household into wild excitement and confusion. Men ran hither and thither bearing the glad tidings that the king had returned.

Old von der Tann was announced within ten minutes after Barney reached his apartments. He urged upon the American the necessity for greater caution in the future.

“Your majesty’s life is never safe while Peter of Blentz is abroad in Lutha,” cried he.

“It was to save your king from Peter that we rode from Lustadt last night,” replied Barney, but the old prince did not catch the double meaning of the words.

While they talked a young officer of cavalry begged an audience. He had important news for the king, he said. From him Barney learned that Peter of Blentz had succeeded in recruiting a fair-sized army in the lowlands. Two regiments of government infantry and a squadron of cavalry had united forces with him, for there were those who still accepted him as regent, believing his contention that the true king was dead, and that he whose coronation was to be attempted was but the puppet of old Von der Tann.

The morning of November 5 broke clear and cold. The old town of Lustadt was awakened with a start at daybreak by the booming of cannon. Mounted messengers galloped hither and thither through the steep, winding streets. Troops, foot and horse, moved at the double from the barracks along the King’s Road to the fortifications which guard the entrance to the city at the foot

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of Margaretha Street.

Upon the heights above the town Barney Custer and the old Prince von der Tann stood surrounded by officers and aides watching the advance of a skirmish line up the slopes toward Lustadt. Behind, the thin line columns of troops were marching under cover of two batteries of field artillery that Peter of Blentz had placed upon a wooden knoll to the southeast of the city.

The guns upon the single fort that, overlooking the broad valley, guarded the entire southern exposure of the city were answering the fire of Prince Peter's artillery, while several machine guns had been placed to sweep the slope up which the skirmish line was advancing.

The trees that masked the enemy's pieces extended upward along the ridge and the eastern edge of the city. Barney saw that a force of men might easily reach a commanding position from that direction and enter Lustadt almost in rear of the fortifications. Below him a squadron of the Royal Horse were just emerging from their stables, taking their way toward the plain to join in a concerted movement against the troops that were advancing toward the fort.

He turned to an aide de camp standing just behind him.

"Intercept that squadron and direct the major to move due east along the King's Road to the grove," he commanded. "We will join him there."

And as the officer spurred down the steep and narrow street the American, followed by Von der Tann and his staff, wheeled and galloped eastward.

Ten minutes later the party entered the wood at the edge of town, where the squadron soon joined them. Von der Tann was mystified at the purpose of this change in the position of the general staff, since from the wood they could see nothing of the battle waging upon the slope. During his brief intercourse with the man he thought king he had quite forgotten that there had been any question as to the young man's sanity, for he had given no indication of possessing aught but a well-balanced mind. Now, however, he commenced to have misgivings, if not of his sanity,

then as to his judgment at least.

“I fear, your majesty,” he ventured, “that we are putting ourselves too much out of touch with the main body of the army. We can neither see nor accomplish anything from this position.”

“We were too far away to accomplish much upon the top of that mountain,” replied Barney, “but we’re going to commence doing things now. You will please to ride back along the King’s Road and take direct command of the troops mobilized near the fort.

“Direct the artillery to redouble their fire upon the enemy’s battery for five minutes, and then to cease firing into the wood entirely. At the same instant you may order a cautious advance against the troops advancing up the slope.

“When you see us emerge upon the west side of the grove where the enemy’s guns are now, you may order a charge, and we will take them simultaneously upon their right flank with a cavalry charge.”

“But, your majesty,” exclaimed Von der Tann dubiously, “where will you be in the mean time?”

“We shall be with the major’s squadron, and when you see us emerging from the grove, you will know that we have taken Peter’s guns and that everything is over except the shouting.”

“You are not going to accompany the charge!” cried the old prince.

“We are going to lead it,” and the pseudo-king of Lutha wheeled his mount as though to indicate that the time for talking was past.

With a signal to the major commanding the squadron of Royal Horse, he moved eastward into the wood. Prince Ludwig hesitated a moment as though to question further the wisdom of the move, but finally with a shake of his head he trotted off in the direction of the fort.

Five minutes later the enemy were delighted to note that the fire upon their concealed battery had suddenly ceased.

Then Peter saw a force of foot-soldiers deploy from the city and advance slowly in line of skirmishers down the slope to meet

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his own firing line.

Immediately he did what Barney had expected that he would — turned the fire of his artillery toward the south-west, directly away from the point from which the American and the crack squadron were advancing.

So it came that the cavalymen crept through the woods upon the rear of the guns, unseen; the noise of their advance was drowned by the detonation of the cannon.

The first that the artillerymen knew of the enemy in their rear was a shout of warning from one of the powder-men at a caisson, who had caught a glimpse of the grim line advancing through the trees at his rear.

Instantly an effort was made to wheel several of the pieces about and train them upon the advancing horsemen; but even had there been time, a shout that rose from several of Peter's artillerymen as the Royal Horse broke into full view would doubtless have prevented the maneuver, for at sight of the tall, bearded, young man who galloped in front of the now charging cavalymen there rose a shout of "The king! The king!"

With the force of an avalanche the Royal Horse rode through those two batteries of field artillery; and in the thick of the fight that followed rode the American, a smile upon his face, for in his ears rang the wild shouts of his troopers: "For the king! For the king!"

In the moment that the enemy made their first determined stand a bullet brought down the great bay upon which Barney rode. A dozen of Peter's men rushed forward to seize the man stumbling to his feet. As many more of the Royal Horse closed around him, and there, for five minutes, was waged as fierce a battle for possession of a king as was ever fought.

But already many of the artillerymen had deserted the guns that had not yet been attacked, for the magic name of king had turned their blood to water. Fifty or more raised a white flag and surrendered without striking a blow, and when, at last, Barney and his little bodyguard fought their way through those who surrounded them they found the balance of the field already won.



Upon the slope below the city the loyal troops were advancing upon the enemy. Old Prince Ludwig paced back and forth behind them, apparently oblivious to the rain of bullets about him. Every moment he turned his eyes toward the wooded ridge from which there now belched an almost continuous fusillade of shells upon the advancing royalists.

Quite suddenly the cannonading ceased and the old man halted in his tracks, his gaze riveted upon the wood. For several minutes he saw no sign of what was transpiring behind that screen of sere and yellow autumn leaves, and then a man came running out, and after him another and another.

The prince raised his field glasses to his eyes. He almost cried aloud in his relief — the uniforms of the fugitives were those of artillerymen, and only cavalry had accompanied the king. A moment later there appeared in the center of his lenses a tall figure with a full beard. He rode, swinging his saber above his head, and behind him at full gallop came a squadron of the Royal Horse.

Old von der Tann could restrain himself no longer.

“The king! The king!” he cried to those about him, pointing in the direction of the wood.

The officers gathered there and the soldiery before him heard and took up the cry, and then from the old man’s lips came the command, “Charge!” and a thousand men tore down the slopes of Lustadt upon the forces of Peter of Blentz, while from the east the king charged their right flank at the head of the Royal Horse.

Peter of Blentz saw that the day was lost, for the troops upon the right were crumpling before the false king while he and his cavalymen were yet a half mile distant. Before the retreat could become a rout the prince regent ordered his forces to fall back slowly upon a suburb that lies in the valley below the city.

Once safely there he raised a white flag, asking a conference with Prince Ludwig.

“Your majesty,” said the old man, “what answer shall we send the traitor who even now ignores the presence of his king?”

“Treat with him,” replied the American. “He may be honest

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enough in his belief that I am an impostor.”

Von der Tann shrugged his shoulders, but did as Barney bid, and for half an hour the young man waited with Butzow while Von der Tann and Peter met halfway between the forces for their conference.

A dozen members of the most powerful of the older nobility accompanied Ludwig. When they returned their faces were a picture of puzzled bewilderment. With them were several officers, soldiers and civilians from Peter's contingency.

“What said he?” asked Barney.

“He said, your majesty,” replied Von der Tann, “that he is confident you are not the king, and that these men he has sent with me knew the king well at Blentz. As proof that you are not the king he has offered the evidence of your own denials — made not only to his officers and soldiers, but to the man who is now your loyal lieutenant, Butzow, and to the Princess Emma von der Tann, my daughter.

“He insists that he is fighting for the welfare of Lutha, while we are traitors, attempting to seat an impostor upon the throne of the dead Leopold. I will admit that we are at a loss, your majesty, to know where lies the truth and where the falsity in this matter.

“We seek only to serve our country and our king but there are those among us who, to be entirely frank, are not yet convinced that you are Leopold. The result of the conference may not, then, meet with the hearty approval of your majesty.”

“What was the result?” asked Barney.

“It was decided that all hostilities cease, and that Prince Peter be given an opportunity to establish the validity of his claim that your majesty is an impostor. If he is able to do so to the entire satisfaction of a majority of the old nobility, we have agreed to support him in a return to his regency.”

For a moment there was deep silence. Many of the nobles stood with averted faces and eyes upon the ground.

The American, a half-smile upon his face, turned toward the men of Peter who had come to denounce him. He knew what their verdict would be. He knew that if he were to save the throne for

Leopold he must hold it at any cost until Leopold should be found.

Troopers were scouring the country about Lustadt as far as Blentz in search of Maenck and Coblich. Could they locate these two and arrest them "with all found in their company," as his order read, he felt sure that he would be able to deliver the missing king to his subjects in time for the coronation at noon.

Barney looked straight into the eyes of old Von der Tann.

"You have given us the opinion of others, Prince Ludwig," he said. "Now you may tell us your own views of the matter."

"I shall have to abide by the decision of the majority," replied the old man. "But I have seen your majesty under fire, and if you are not the king, for Lutha's sake you ought to be."

"He is not Leopold," said one of the officers who had accompanied the prince from Peter's camp. "I was governor of Blentz for three years and as familiar with the king's face as with that of my own brother."

"No," cried several of the others, "this man is not the king."

Several of the nobles drew away from Barney. Others looked at him questioningly.

Butzow stepped close to his side, and it was noticeable that the troopers, and even the officers, of the Royal Horse which Barney had led in the charge upon the two batteries in the wood, pressed a little closer to the American. This fact did not escape Butzow's notice.

"If you are content to take the word of the servants of a traitor and a would-be regicide," he cried, "I am not. There has been no proof advanced that this man is not the king. In so far as I am concerned he is the king, nor ever do I expect to serve another more worthy of the title.

"If Peter of Blentz has real proof — not the testimony of his own faction — that Leopold of Lutha is dead, let him bring it forward before noon today, for at noon we shall crown a king in the cathedral at Lustadt, and I for one pray to God that it may be he who has led us in battle today."

A shout of applause rose from the Royal Horse, and from

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the foot-soldiers who had seen the king charge across the plain, scattering the enemy before him.

Barney, appreciating the advantage in the sudden turn affairs had taken following Butzow's words, swung to his saddle.

"Until Peter of Blentz brings to Lustadt one with a better claim to the throne," he said, "we shall continue to rule Lutha, nor shall other than Leopold be crowned her king. We approve of the amnesty you have granted, Prince Ludwig, and Peter of Blentz is free to enter Lustadt, as he will, so long as he does not plot against the true king.

"Major," he added, turning to the commander of the squadron at his back, "we are returning to the palace. Your squadron will escort us, remaining on guard there about the grounds. Prince Ludwig, you will see that machine guns are placed about the palace and commanding the approaches to the cathedral."

With a nod to the cavalry major he wheeled his horse and trotted up the slope toward Lustadt.

With a grim smile Prince Ludwig von der Tann mounted his horse and rode toward the fort. At his side were several of the nobles of Lutha. They looked at him in astonishment.

"You are doing his bidding, although you do not know that he is the true king?" asked one of them.

"Were he an impostor," replied the old man, "he would have insisted by word of mouth that he is king. But not once has he said that he is Leopold. Instead, he has proved his kingship by his acts."

## CHAPTER XI

### A TIMELY INTERVENTION

NINE o'clock found Barney Custer pacing up and down his apartments in the palace. No clue as to the whereabouts of Coblich, Maenck or the king had been discovered. One by one his troopers had returned to Butzow empty-handed, and as much at a loss as to the hiding-place of their quarry as when they had set out upon their search.

Peter of Blentz and his retainers had entered the city and already had commenced to gather at the cathedral.

Peter, at the residence of Coblich, had succeeded in gathering about him many of the older nobility whom he pledged to support him in case he could prove to them that the man who occupied the royal palace was not Leopold of Lutha.

They agreed to support him in his regency if he produced proof that the true Leopold was dead, and Peter of Blentz waited with growing anxiety the coming of Coblich with word that he had the king in custody. Peter was staking all on a single daring move which he had decided to make in his game of intrigue.

As Barney paced within the palace, waiting for word that Leopold had been found, Peter of Blentz was filled with equal apprehension as he, too, waited for the same tidings. At last he heard the pound of hoofs upon the pavement without and a moment later Coblich, his clothing streaked with dirt, blood caked upon his face from a wound across the forehead, rushed in to the presence of the prince regent.

Peter drew him hurriedly into a small study on the first floor.

"Well?" he whispered, as the two faced each other.

"We have him," replied Coblich. But we had the devil's own time getting him. Stein was killed and Maenck and I both wounded, and all morning we have spent the time hiding from troopers who seemed to be searching for us. Only fifteen minutes since did we reach the hiding-place that you instructed us to use.

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But we have him, your highness, and he is in such a state of cowardly terror that he is ready to agree to anything, if you will but spare his life and set him free across the border.”

“It is too late for that now, Coblich,” replied Peter. “There is but one way that Leopold of Lutha can serve me now, and that is — dead. Were his corpse to be carried into the cathedral of Lustadt before noon today, and were those who fetched it to swear that the king was killed by the impostor after being dragged from the hospital at Tafelberg where you and Maenck had located him, and from which you were attempting to rescue him, I believe that the people would tear our enemies to pieces. What say you, Coblich?”

The other stared at Peter of Blentz for several seconds while the atrocity of his chief’s plan filtered through his brain.

“My God!” he exclaimed at last. “You mean that you wish me to murder Leopold with my own hands?”

“You put it too crudely, my dear Coblich,” replied the other.

“I cannot do it,” muttered Coblich. “I have never killed a man in my life. I am getting old. No, I could never do it. I should not sleep nights.”

“If it is not done, Coblich, and Leopold comes into his own,” said Peter slowly, “you will be caught and hanged higher than Haman. And if you do not do it, and the impostor is crowned today, then you will be either hanged officially or knifed unofficially, and without any choice in the matter whatsoever. Nothing, Coblich, but the dead body of the true Leopold can save your neck. You have your choice, therefore, of letting him live to prove your treason, or letting him die and becoming chancellor of Lutha.”

Slowly Coblich turned toward the door. “You are right,” he said, “but may God have mercy on my soul. I never thought that I should have to do it with my own hands.”

So saying he left the room and a moment later Peter of Blentz smiled as he heard the pounding of a horse’s hoofs upon the pavement without.

Then the Regent entered the room he had recently quitted

and spoke to the nobles of Lutha who were gathered there.

“Coblich has found the body of the murdered king,” he said. “I have directed him to bring it to the cathedral. He came upon the impostor and his confederate, Lieutenant Butzow, as they were bearing the corpse from the hospital at Tafelberg where the king has lain unknown since the rumor was spread by Von der Tann that he had been killed by bandits.

“He was not killed until last evening, my lords, and you shall see today the fresh wounds upon him. When the time comes that we can present this grisly evidence of the guilt of the impostor and those who uphold him, I shall expect you all to stand at my side, as you have promised.”

With one accord the noblemen pledged anew their allegiance to Peter of Blentz if he could produce one-quarter of the evidence he claimed to possess.

“All that we wish to know positively is,” said one, “that the man who bears the title of king today is really Leopold of Lutha, or that he is not. If not then he stands convicted of treason, and we shall know how to conduct ourselves.”

Together the party rode to the cathedral, the majority of the older nobility now openly espousing the cause of the Regent.

At the palace Barney was about distracted. Butzow was urging him to take the crown whether he was Leopold or not, for the young lieutenant saw no hope for Lutha, if either the scoundrelly Regent or the cowardly man whom Barney had assured him was the true king should come into power.

It was eleven o'clock. In another hour Barney knew that he must have found some new solution of his dilemma, for there seemed little probability that the king would be located in the brief interval that remained before the coronation. He wondered what they did to people who stole thrones. For a time he figured his chances of reaching the border ahead of the enraged populace. All had depended upon the finding of the king, and he had been so sure that it could be accomplished in time, for Coblich and Maenck had had but a few hours in which to conceal the monarch

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before the search was well under way.

Armed with the king's warrants, his troopers had ridden through the country, searching houses, and questioning all whom they met. Patrols had guarded every road that the fugitives might take either to Lustadt, Blentz, or the border; but no king had been found and no trace of his abductors.

Prince von der Tann, Barney was convinced, was on the point of deserting him, and going over to the other side. It was true that the old man had carried out his instructions relative to the placing of the machine guns; but they might be used as well against him, where they stood, as for him.

From his window he could see the broad avenue which passes before the royal palace of Lutha. It was crowded with throngs moving toward the cathedral. Presently there came a knock upon the closed door of his chamber.

At his "Enter" a functionary announced: "His Royal Highness Ludwig, Prince von der Tann!"

The old man was much perturbed at the rumors he had heard relative to the assassination of the true Leopold. Soldier-like, he blurted out his suspicions and his ultimatum.

"None but the royal blood of Rubinroth may reign in Lutha while there be a Rubinroth left to reign and old Von der Tann lives," he cried in conclusion.

At the name "Rubinroth" Barney started. It was his mother's name. Suddenly the truth flashed upon him. He understood now the reticence of both his father and mother relative to her early life.

"Prince Ludwig," said the young man earnestly, "I have only the good of Lutha in my heart. For three weeks I have labored and risked death a hundred times to place the legitimate heir to the crown of Lutha upon his throne. I ——"

He hesitated, not knowing just how to commence the confession he was determined to make, though he was positive that it would place Peter of Blentz upon the throne, since the old prince had promised to support the Regent could it be proved that Barney was an impostor.



“I,” he started again, and then there came an interruption at the door.

“A messenger, your majesty,” announced the doorman, “who says that he must have audience at once upon a matter of life and death to the king.”

“We will see him in the ante-chamber,” replied Barney, moving toward the door. “Await us here, Prince Ludwig.”

A moment later he re-entered the apartment. There was an expression of renewed hope upon his face.

“As we were about to remark, my dear prince,” he said, “I swear that the royal blood of the Rubinroths flows in my veins, and as God is my judge, none other than the true Leopold of Lutha shall be crowned today. And now we must prepare for the coronation. If there be trouble in the cathedral, Prince Ludwig, we look to your sword in protection of the king.”

“When I am with you, sire,” said Von der Tann, “I know that you are king. When I saw how you led the troops in battle, I prayed that there could be no mistake. God give that I am right. But God help you if you are playing with old Ludwig von der Tann.”

When the old man had left the apartment Barney summoned an aide and sent for Butzow. Then he hurried to the bath that adjoined the apartment, and when the lieutenant of horse was announced Barney called through a soapy lather for his confederate to enter.

“What are you doing, sire?” cried Butzow in amazement.

“Cut out the ‘sire,’ old man,” shouted Barney Custer of Beatrice. “this is the fifth of November and I am shaving off this alfalfa. The king is found!”

“What?” cried Butzow, and upon his face there was little to indicate the rejoicing that a loyal subject of Leopold of Lutha should have felt at that announcement.

“There is a man in the next room,” went on Barney, “who can lead us to the spot where Coblich and Maenck guard the king. Get him in here.”

Butzow hastened to comply with the American’s

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instructions, and a moment later returned to the apartment with the old shopkeeper of Tafelberg.

As Barney shaved he issued directions to the two. Within the room to the east, he said, there were the king's coronation robes, and in a smaller dressing-room beyond they would find a long gray cloak.

They were to wrap all these in a bundle which the old shopkeeper was to carry.

"And, Butzow," added Barney, "look to my revolvers and your own, and lay my sword out as well. The chances are that we shall have to use them before we are ten minutes older."

In an incredibly short space of time the young man emerged from the bath, his luxuriant beard gone forever, he hoped. Butzow looked at him with a smile.

"I must say that the beard did not add greatly to your majesty's good looks," he said.

"Never mind the bouquets, old man," cried Barney, cramming his arms into the sleeves of his khaki jacket and buckling sword and revolver about him, as he hurried toward a small door that opened upon the opposite side of the apartment to that through which his visitors had been conducted.

Together the three hastened through a narrow, little-used corridor and down a flight of well-worn stone steps to a door that let upon the rear court of the palace.

There were grooms and servants there, and soldiers too, who saluted Butzow, according the old shopkeeper and the smooth-faced young stranger only cursory glances. It was evident that without his beard it was not likely that Barney would be again mistaken for the king.

At the stables Butzow requisitioned three horses, and soon the trio was galloping through a little-frequented street toward the northern, hilly environs of Lustadt. They rode in silence until they came to an old stone building, whose boarded windows and general appearance of dilapidation proclaimed its long tenantless condition. Rank weeds, now rustling dry and yellow in the November wind, choked what once might have been a luxuriant

garden. A stone wall, which had at one time entirely surrounded the grounds, had been almost completely removed from the front to serve as foundation stone for a smaller edifice farther down the mountainside.

The horsemen avoided this break in the wall, coming up instead upon the rear side where their approach was wholly screened from the building by the wall upon that exposure.

Close in they dismounted, and leaving the animals in charge of the shopkeeper of Tafelberg, Barney and Butzow hastened toward a small postern-gate which swung, groaning, upon a single rusted hinge. Each felt that there was no time for caution or stratagem. Instead all depended upon the very boldness and rashness of their attack, and so as they came through into the courtyard the two dashed headlong for the building.

Chance accomplished for them what no amount of careful execution might have done, and they came within the ruin unnoticed by the four who occupied the old, darkened library.

Possibly the fact that one of the men had himself just entered and was excitedly talking to the others may have drowned the noisy approach of the two. However that may be, it is a fact that Barney and the cavalry officer came to the very door of the library unheard.

There they halted, listening. Coblich was speaking.

“The Regent commands it, Maenck,” he was saying. “It is the only thing that can save our necks. He said that you had better be the one to do it, since it was your carelessness that permitted the fellow to escape from Blentz.”

Huddled in a far corner of the room was an abject figure trembling in terror. At the words of Coblich it staggered to its feet. It was the king.

“Have pity — have pity!” he cried. “Do not kill me, and I will go away where none will ever know that I live. You can tell Peter that I am dead. Tell him anything, only spare my life. Oh, why did I ever listen to the cursed fool who tempted me to think of regaining the crown that has brought me only misery and suffering — the crown that has now placed the sentence of death

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upon me.”

“Why not let him go?” suggested the trooper, who up to this time had not spoken. “If we don’t kill him, we can’t be hanged for his murder.”

“Don’t be too sure of that,” exclaimed Maenck. “If he goes away and never returns, what proof can we offer that we did not kill him, should we be charged with the crime? And if we let him go, and later he returns and gains his throne, he will see that we are hanged anyway for treason.

“The safest thing to do is to put him where he at least cannot come back to threaten us, and having done so upon the orders of Peter, let the king’s blood be upon Peter’s head. I, at least, shall obey my master, and let you two bear witness that I did the thing with my own hand.” So saying he drew his sword and crossed toward the king.

But Captain Ernst Maenck never reached his sovereign.

As the terrified shriek of the sorry monarch rang through the interior of the desolate ruin another sound mingled with it, half-drowning the piercing wail of terror.

It was the sharp crack of a revolver, and even as it spoke Maenck lunged awkwardly forward, stumbled, and collapsed at Leopold’s feet. With a moan the king shrank back from the grisly thing that touched his boot, and then two men were in the center of the room, and things were happening with a rapidity that was bewildering.

About all that he could afterward recall with any distinctness was the terrified face of Coblich, as he rushed past him toward a door in the opposite side of the room, and the horrid leer upon the face of the dead trooper, who foolishly, had made a move to draw his revolver.

Within the cathedral at Lustadt excitement was at fever heat. It lacked but two minutes of noon, and as yet no king had come to claim the crown. Rumors were running riot through the close-packed audience.

One man had heard the king’s chamberlain report to Prince

von der Tann that the master of ceremonies had found the king's apartments vacant when he had gone to urge the monarch to hasten his preparations for the coronation.

Another had seen Butzow and two strangers galloping north through the city. A third told of a little old man who had come to the king with an urgent message.

Peter of Blentz and Prince Ludwig were talking in whispers at the foot of the chancel steps. Peter ascended the steps and facing the assemblage raised a silencing hand.

"He who claimed to be Leopold of Lutha," he said, "was but a mad adventurer. He would have seized the throne of the Rubinroths had his nerve not failed him at the last moment. He has fled. The true king is dead. Now I, Prince Regent of Lutha, declare the throne vacant, and announce myself king!"

There were a few scattered cheers and some hissing. A score of the nobles rose as though to protest, but before any could take a step the attention of all was directed toward the sorry figure of a white-faced man who scurried up the broad center aisle.

It was Coblich.

He ran to Peter's side, and though he attempted to speak in a whisper, so out of breath, and so filled with hysterical terror was he that his words came out in gasps that were audible to many of those who stood near by.

"Maenck is dead," he cried. "The impostor has stolen the king."

Peter of Blentz went white as his lieutenant. Von der Tann heard and demanded an explanation.

"You said that Leopold was dead," he said accusingly.

Peter regained his self-control quickly.

"Coblich is excited," he explained. "He means that the impostor has stolen the body of the king that Coblich and Maenck had discovered and were bring to Lustadt."

Von der Tann looked troubled.

He knew not what to make of the series of wild tales that had come to his ears within the past hour. He had hoped that the young man whom he had last seen in the king's apartments was the

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true Leopold. He would have been glad to have served such a one, but there had been many inexplicable occurrences which tended to cast a doubt upon the man's claims — and yet, had he ever claimed to be the king? It suddenly occurred to the old prince that he had not. On the contrary he had repeatedly stated to Prince Ludwig's daughter and to Lieutenant Butzow that he was not Leopold.

It seemed that they had all been so anxious to believe him king that they had forced the false position upon him, and now if he had indeed committed the atrocity that Coblich charged against him, who could wonder? With less provocation men had before attempted to seize thrones by more dastardly means.

Peter of Blentz was speaking.

"Let the coronation proceed," he cried, "that Lutha may have a true king to frustrate the plans of the impostor and the traitors who had supported him."

He cast a meaning glance at Prince von der Tann.

There were many cries for Peter of Blentz. "Let's have done with treason, and place upon the throne of Lutha one whom we know to be both a Luthanian and sane. Down with the mad king! Down with the impostor!"

Peter turned to ascend the chancel steps.

Von der Tann still hesitated. Below him upon one side of the aisle were massed his own retainers. Opposite them were the men of the Regent, and dividing the two the parallel ranks of Horse Guards stretched from the chancel down the broad aisle to the great doors. These were strongly for the impostor, if impostor he was, who had led them to victory over the men of the Blentz faction.

Von der Tann knew that they would fight to the last ditch for their hero should he come to claim the crown. Yet how would they fight — to which side would they cleave, were he to attempt to frustrate the design of the Regent to seize the throne of Lutha?

Already Peter of Blentz had approached the bishop, who, eager to propitiate whoever seemed most likely to become king, gave the signal for the procession that was to mark the solemn bearing of the crown of Lutha up the aisle to the chancel.

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Outside the cathedral there was the sudden blare of trumpets. The great doors swung violently open, and the entire throng were upon their feet in an instant as a trooper of the Royal Horse shouted: "The king! The king! Make way for Leopold of Lutha!"

## CHAPTER XII

### THE GRATITUDE OF A KING

AT the cry silence fell upon the throng. Every head was turned toward the great doors through which the head of a procession was just visible. It was a grim looking procession — the head of it, at least.

There were four khaki-clad trumpeters from the Royal Horse Guards, the gay and resplendent uniforms which they should have donned today conspicuous for their absence. From their brazen bugles sounded another loud fanfare, and then they separated, two upon each side of the aisle, and between them marched three men.

One was tall, with gray eyes and had a reddish-brown beard. He was fully clothed in the coronation robes of Leopold. Upon his either hand walked the others — Lieutenant Butzow and a gray-eyed, smooth-faced, square-jawed stranger.

Behind them marched the balance of the Royal Horse Guards that were not already on duty within the cathedral. As the eyes of the multitude fell upon the man in the coronation robes there were cries of: “The king! Impostor!” and “Von der Tann’s puppet!”

“Denounce him!” whispered one of Peter’s henchmen in his master’s ear.

The Regent moved closer to the aisle, that he might meet the impostor at the foot of the chancel steps. The procession was moving steadily up the aisle.

Among the clan of Von der Tann a young girl with wide eyes was bending forward that she might have a better look at the face of the king. As he came opposite her her eyes filled with horror, and then she saw the eyes of the smooth-faced stranger at the king’s side. They were brave, laughing eyes, and as they looked straight into her own the truth flashed upon her, and the girl gave a gasp of dismay as she realized that the king of Lutha and the king of her heart were not one and the same.



At last the head of the procession was almost at the foot of the chancel steps. There were murmurs of: "It is not the king," and "Who is this new impostor?"

Leopold's eyes were searching the faces of the close-packed nobility about the chancel. At last they fell upon the face of Peter. The young man halted not two paces from the Regent. The man went white as the king's eyes bored straight into his miserable soul.

"Peter of Blentz," cried the young man, "as God is your judge, tell the truth today. Who am I?"

The legs of the Prince Regent trembled. He sank upon his knees, raising his hands in supplication toward the other. "Have pity on me, your majesty, have pity!" he cried.

"Who am I, man?" insisted the king.

"You are Leopold Rubinroth, sire, by the grace of God, king of Lutha," cried the frightened man. "Have mercy on an old man, your majesty."

"Wait! Am I mad? Was I ever mad?"

"As God is my judge, sire, no!" replied Peter of Blentz.

Leopold turned to Butzow.

"Remove the traitor from our presence," he commanded, and at a word from the lieutenant a dozen guardsmen seized the trembling man and hustled him from the cathedral amid hisses and execrations.

Following the coronation the king was closeted in his private audience chamber in the palace with Prince Ludwig.

"I cannot understand what has happened, even now, your majesty," the old man was saying. "That you are the true Leopold is all that I am positive of, for the discomfiture of Prince Peter evidenced that fact all too plainly. But who the impostor was who ruled Lutha in your name for two days, disappearing as miraculously as he came, I cannot guess.

"But for another miracle which preserved you for us in the nick of time he might now be wearing the crown of Lutha in your stead. Having Peter of Blentz safely in custody our next immediate

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task should be to hunt down the impostor and bring him to justice also; though” — and the old prince sighed — “he was indeed a brave man, and a noble figure of a king as he led your troops to battle.”

The king had been smiling as Von der Tann first spoke of the “impostor,” but at the old man’s praise of the other’s bravery a slight flush tinged his cheek, and the shadow of a scowl crossed his brow.

“Wait,” he said, “we shall not have to look far for your ‘impostor,’” and summoning an aide he dispatched him for “Lieutenant Butzow and Mr. Custer.”

A moment later the two entered the audience chamber. Barney found that Leopold the king, surrounded by comforts and safety, was a very different person from Leopold the fugitive. The weak face now wore an expression of arrogance, though the king spoke most graciously to the American.

“Here, Von der Tann,” said Leopold, “is your ‘impostor.’ But for him I should doubtless be dead by now, or once again a prisoner at Blentz.”

Barney and Butzow found it necessary to repeat their stories several times before the old man could fully grasp all that had transpired beneath his very nose without his being aware of scarce a single detail of it.

When he was finally convinced that they were telling the truth, he extended his hand to the American.

“I knelt to you once, young man,” he said, “and kissed your hand. I should be filled with bitterness and rage toward you. On the contrary, I find that I am proud to have served in the retinue of such an impostor as you, for you upheld the prestige of the house of Rubinroth upon the battlefield, and though you might have had a crown, you refused it and brought the true king into his own.”

Leopold sat tapping his foot upon the carpet. It was all very well if he, the king, chose to praise the American, but there was no need for old von der Tann to slop over so. The king did not like it. As a matter of fact, he found himself becoming very jealous of the man who had placed him upon his throne.

“There is only one thing that I can harbor against you,” continued Prince Ludwig, “and that is that in a single instance you deceived me, for an hour before the coronation you told me that you were a Rubinroth.”

“I told you, prince,” corrected Barney, “that the royal blood of Rubinroth flowed in my veins, and so it does. I am the son of the runaway Princess Victoria of Lutha.”

Both Leopold and Ludwig looked their surprise, and to the king’s eyes came a sudden look of fear. With the royal blood in his veins, what was there to prevent this popular hero from some day striving for the throne he had once refused? Leopold knew that the minds of men were wont to change most unaccountably.

“Butzow,” he said suddenly to the lieutenant of horse, “how many do you imagine know positively that he who has ruled Lutha for the past two days and he who was crowned in the cathedral this noon are not one and the same?”

“Only a few besides those who are in this room, your majesty,” replied Butzow. “Peter and Coblich have known it from the first, and then there is Kramer, the loyal old shopkeeper of Tafelberg, who followed Coblich and Maenck all night and half a day as they dragged the king to the hiding-place where we found him. Other than these there may be those who guess the truth, but there are none who know.”

For a moment the king sat in thought. Then he rose and commenced pacing back and forth the length of the apartment.

“Why should they ever know?” he said at last, halting before the three men who had been standing watching him. “For the sake of Lutha they should never know that another than the true king sat upon the throne even for an hour.”

He was thinking of the comparison that might be drawn between the heroic figure of the American and his own colorless part in the events which had led up to his coronation. In his heart of hearts he felt that old Von der Tann rather regretted that the American had not been the king, and he hated the old man accordingly, and was commencing to hate the American as well.

Prince Ludwig stood looking at the carpet after the king had

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spoken. His judgment told him that the king's suggestion was a wise one; but he was sorry and ashamed that it had come from Leopold. Butzow's lips almost showed the contempt that he felt for the ingratitude of his king.

Barney Custer was the first to speak.

"I think his majesty is quite right," he said, "and tonight I can leave the palace after dark and cross the border some time tomorrow evening. The people need never know the truth."

Leopold looked relieved.

"We must reward you, Mr. Custer," he said. "Name that which it lies within our power to grant you and it shall be yours."

Barney thought of the girl he loved; but he did not mention her name, for he knew that she was not for him now.

"There is nothing, your majesty," he said.

"A money reward," Leopold started to suggest, and then Barney Custer lost his temper.

A flush mounted to his face, his chin went up, and there came to his lips bitter words of sarcasm. With an effort, however, he held his tongue, and, turning his back upon the king, his broad shoulders proclaiming the contempt he felt, he walked slowly out of the room.

Von der Tann and Butzow and Leopold of Lutha stood in silence as the American passed out of sight beyond the portal.

The manner of his going had been an affront to the king, and the young ruler had gone red with anger.

"Butzow," he cried, "bring the fellow back; he shall be taught a lesson in the deference that is due kings."

Butzow hesitated. "He has risked his life a dozen times for your majesty," said the lieutenant.

Leopold flushed.

"Do not humiliate him, sire," advised Von der Tann. "He has earned a greater reward at your hands than that."

The king resumed his pacing for a moment, coming to a halt once more before the two.

"We shall take no notice of his insolence," he said, "and that shall be our royal reward for his services. More than he deserves,

we dare say, at that.”

As Barney hastened through the palace on his way to his new quarters to obtain his arms and order his horse saddled, he came suddenly upon a girlish figure gazing sadly from a window upon the drear November world — her heart as sad as the day.

At the sound of his footstep she turned, and as her eyes met the gray ones of the man she stood poised as though of half a mind to fly. For a moment neither spoke.

“Can your highness forgive?” he asked.

For answer the girl buried her face in her hands and dropped upon the cushioned window seat before her. The American came close and knelt at her side.

“Don’t,” he begged as he saw her shoulders rise to the sudden sobbing that racked her slender frame. “Don’t!”

He thought that she wept from mortification that she had given her kisses to another than the king.

“None knows,” he continued, “what has passed between us. None but you and I need ever know. I tried to make you understand that I was not Leopold; but you would not believe. It is not my fault that I loved you. It is not my fault that I shall always love you. Tell me that you forgive me my part in the chain of strange circumstances that deceived you into an acknowledgment of a love that you intended for another. Forgive me, Emma!”

Down the corridor behind them a tall figure approached on silent, noiseless feet. At sight of the two at the window seat it halted. It was the king.

The girl looked up suddenly into the eyes of the American bending so close above her.

“I can never forgive you,” she cried, “for not being the king, for I am betrothed to him — and I love you!”

Before she could prevent him, Barney Custer had taken her in his arms, and though at first she made a pretense of attempting to escape, at last she lay quite still. Her arms found their way about the man’s neck, and her lips returned the kisses that his were showering upon her upturned mouth.

Presently her glance wandered above the shoulder of the

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American, and of a sudden her eyes filled with terror, and, with a little gasp of consternation, she struggled to free herself.

“Let me go!” she whispered. “Let me go — the king!”

Barney sprang to his feet and, turning, faced Leopold. The king had gone quite white.

“Failing to rob me of my crown,” he cried in a trembling voice, “you now seek to rob me of my betrothed! Go to your father at once, and as for you — you shall learn what it means for you thus to meddle in the affairs of kings.”

Barney saw the terrible position in which his love had placed the Princess Emma. His only thought now was for her. Bowing low before her he spoke so that the king might hear, yet as though his words were for her ears alone.

“Your highness knows the truth, now,” he said, “and that after all I am not the king. I can only ask that you will forgive me the deception. Now go to your father as the king commands.”

Slowly the girl turned away. Her heart was torn between love for this man, and her duty toward the other to whom she had been betrothed in childhood. The hereditary instinct of obedience to her sovereign was strong within her, and the bonds of custom and society held her in their relentless shackles. With a sob she passed up the corridor, curtsying to the king as she passed him.

When she had gone Leopold turned to the American. There was an evil look in the little gray eyes of the monarch.

“You may go your way,” he said coldly. “We shall give you forty-eight hours to leave Lutha. Should you ever return your life shall be the forfeit.”

The American kept back the hot words that were ready upon the end of his tongue. For her sake he must bow to fate. With a slight inclination of his head toward Leopold he wheeled and resumed his way toward his quarters.

Half an hour later as he was about to descend to the courtyard where a trooper of the Royal Horse held his waiting mount, Butzow burst suddenly into his room.

“For God’s sake,” cried the lieutenant, “get out of this. The king has changed his mind, and there is an officer of the guard on

his way here now with a file of soldiers to place you under arrest. Leopold swears that he will hang you for treason. Princess Emma has spurned him, and he is wild with rage.”

The dismal November twilight had given place to bleak night as two men cantered from the palace courtyard and turned their horses' heads northward toward Lutha's nearest boundary. All night they rode, stopping at daylight before a distant farm to feed and water their mounts and snatch a mouthful for themselves. Then onward once again they pressed in their mad flight.

Now that day had come they caught occasional glimpses of a body of horsemen far behind them, but the border was near, and their start such that there was no danger of their being overtaken.

“For the thousandth time, Butzow,” said one of the men, “will you turn back before it is too late?”

But the other only shook his head obstinately, and so they came to the great granite monument which marks the boundary between Lutha and her powerful neighbor upon the north.

Barney held out his hand. “Good-bye, old man,” he said. “If I've learned the ingratitude of kings here in Lutha, I have found something that more than compensates me — the friendship of a brave man. Now hurry back and tell them that I escaped across the border just as I was about to fall into your hands and they will think that you have been pursuing me instead of aiding in my escape across the border.”

But again Butzow shook his head.

“I have fought shoulder to shoulder with you, my friend,” he said. “I have called you king, and after that I could never serve the coward who sits now upon the throne of Lutha. I have made up my mind during this long ride from Lustadt, and I have come to the decision that I should prefer to raise corn in Nebraska with you rather than serve in the court of an ingrate.”

“Well, you are an obstinate Dutchman, after all,” replied the American with a smile, placing his hand affectionately upon the shoulder of his comrade.

There was a clatter of horses' hoofs upon the gravel of the road behind them.

## THE MAD KING

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The two men put spurs to their mounts, and Barney Custer galloped across the northern boundary of Lutha just ahead of a troop of Luthanian cavalry, as had his father thirty years before; but a royal princess had accompanied the father — only a soldier accompanied the son.