

BEVERLY OF GRAUSTARK

By George Barr McCutcheon.

Author of "Graustark"

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"And what?" interposed Beverly who could not wait.

"The description fits our friend Baldos perfectly!"

"You don't mean it?" exclaimed Lorry. "Then he may be any one of the three you have mentioned?"

"Let me tell you what the grand duke's secretary says. I have the official notice, but left it in my desk. The runaway son of the grand duke is called Christobal. He is twenty-seven years of age, speaks English fluently, besides French and our own language. It seems that he attended an English college with Prince Danton and some of our own young men who are still in England. Six weeks ago he disappeared from his father's home. At the same time a dozen wild and venturesome retainers left the grand duchy. The party was seen in Vienna a week later, and the young duke boldly announced that he was off to the east to help his friend Danton in the fight for his throne. Going on the theory that Baldos is this same Christobal we have only to provide a reason for his preferring the wilds to the comforts of our cities. In the first place, he knows there is a large reward for his apprehension and he fears our police. In the second place, he does not care to direct the attention of Prince Danton's foes to himself. He missed Danton in the hills and doubtless was lost for weeks, but the true reason for his flight is made plain in the story that was printed recently in Paris and Berlin newspapers. According to them, Christobal rebelled against his father's right to select a wife for him. The grand duke had chosen a noble and wealthy bride, and the son had selected a beautiful girl from the lower walks of life. Father and son quarreled and neither would give an inch. Christobal would not marry his father's choice, and the grand duke would not sanction his union with the fair plebeian."

Here Beverly exclaimed proudly: "He doesn't look like the sort of man who could be bullied into marrying anybody if he didn't want to."

"And he strikes me as the sort who would marry any one he set his heart upon having," added the princess, with a taunting glance at Miss Calhoun.

"Umph!" sniffed Beverly defiantly. The baron went on with his narrative, exhibiting signs of excitement.

"To lead color to the matter, Christobal's sweetheart, the daughter of a game warden, was murdered the night before her lover fled. I know nothing of the circumstances attending the crime, but it is my understanding that Christobal is not suspected. It is possible that he is ignorant even now of the girl's fate."

"Well, by the gods, we have a goodly lot of heroes about us!" exclaimed Lorry.

"But, after all," ventured the Countess Halfont, "Baldos may be none of these men."

"Good heavens, Aunt Yvonne, don't suggest anything so distressing," said Yvette. "He must be one of them."

"I suggest a speedy way of determining the matter," said Anguish. "Let us send for Baldos and ask him point blank who he is. I think it is up to him to clear away the mystery."

"No!" cried Beverly, starting to her feet.

"It seems to be the only way," said Lorry.

"But I promised him that no questions should be asked," said Beverly, almost tearfully, but quite resolutely. "Didn't I, Yvonne—your highness?"

"Alas, yes!" said the princess, with a pathetic smile of resignation, but with loyalty in the clasp of her hand.

CHAPTER XIV.

THAT same afternoon Baldos, blissfully ignorant of the stir he had created in certain circles, rode out for the first time as a member of the castle guard. He and Haddan were detailed by Colonel Quinnox to act as private escort to Miss Calhoun until otherwise ordered. If Haddan thought himself wiser than Baldos in knowing that their charge was not the princess he was very much mistaken. If he enjoyed the trick that was being played on his fellow guardsman his enjoyment was as nothing when compared to the pleasure Baldos was deriving from the situation.

The royal victoria was driven to the fortress, conveying the supposed princess and the Countess Dagmar to the home of Count Marlanx. The two guards rode bravely behind the equipage, resplendent in brilliant new uniforms. Baldos was mildly surprised and puzzled by the homage paid to the young American girl. It struck him as preposterous that the entire population of Edelweiss could be in the game to deceive him.

"Who is the princess' companion?" he inquired of Haddan as they left the castle grounds.

"The Countess Dagmar, cousin to her highness. She is the wife of Mr. Anguish."

"I have seen her before," said Baldos, a strange smile on his face.

The Countess Dagmar found it difficult at first to meet the eye of the new guard, but he was so punctiliously oblivious that her courage was restored. She even went so far as to whisper in

her face as if probably would not recognize Yvonne as one of the eavesdroppers. The princess had flatly refused to accompany them on the visit to the fortress because of Baldos. Struck by a sudden impulse, Beverly called Baldos to the side of the vehicle.

"Baldos, you behaved very nicely yesterday in exposing the duplicity of those young women," she said.

"I am happy to have pleased your highness," he said steadily.

"It may interest you to know that they ceased to be ladies in waiting after that exposure."

"Yes, your highness, it certainly is interesting," he said as he fell back into position beside Haddan. During the remainder of the ride he caught himself time after time gazing reflectively at the back of her proud little head, possessed of an almost uncontrollable desire to touch the soft brown hair.

"You can't fool that excellent young man much longer, my dear," said the countess, recalling the look in his dark eyes. The same thought had been afflicting Beverly with its probabilities for twenty-four hours and more.

Count Marlanx welcomed his visitors with a graciousness that awoke wonder in the minds of his staff. His marked preference for the American girl did not escape attention. Beverly the bolder young officers in surreptitious grimaces, and with more or less compass. Marlanx surveyed Baldos sternly and coldly, deep approval in his sinister eyes. He had not forgotten the end of the day before.

"I see the favorite on guard," he said blandly. "Has he told you of the lesson in manners he enjoyed last night?" He was leading his guests toward the quarters, Baldos and Haddan following. The new guard could not help hearing the sarcastic remark.

"You didn't have him beaten?" cried Beverly, stopping short.

"No, but I imagine it would have been preferable. I talked with him for half an hour," said the general, laughing significantly.

When the party stopped at the drinking fountain in the center of the fort Baldos halted near by. His face was impassive as marble, his eyes set straight before him, his figure erect and soldierly. An occasional sarcastic remark by the Iron Count, meant for his ears, made no impression upon the deadly composure of the new guard who had had his lesson. Miss Calhoun was conscious of a vague feeling that she had served Baldos an ill turn when she put him into this position.

The count provided a light luncheon in his quarters after the ladies had gone over the fortress. Beverly Calhoun, with all of a woman's indifference to things material, could not but see how poorly equipped the fort was as compared to the ones she had seen in the United States. She and the countess visited the armory, the arsenal and the repair shops before luncheon, reserving the pleasures of the clubhouse, the officers' quarters and the parade ground until afterward. Count Marlanx's home was in the southeast corner of the inclosure, near the gates. Several of the officers lunched with him and the young ladies. Marlanx was assiduous in his attention to Beverly Calhoun, so much so, in fact, that the countess teased her afterward about her conquest of the old and well worn heart. Beverly thought him extremely silly and sentimental, much preferring him in the character of the harsh, implacable martinet.

At regular intervals she saw the straight, martial form of Baldos pass the window near which she sat. He was patrolling the narrow piazza which fronted the house. Toward the close of the rather trying luncheon she was almost unable to control the impulse to rush out and compel him to relax that imposing, machine-like stride. She hungered for a few minutes of the old time freedom with him. The Iron Count was showing her some rare antique bronzes he had collected in the south. The luncheon was over, and the countess had strolled off toward the bastions with the young officers, leaving Beverly alone with the host. Servants came in to clear the tables, but the count harshly ordered them to wait until the guests had departed.

"It is the dearest thing I have seen," said Beverly, holding a rare old candlestick at arm's length and looking at it in as many ways as the wrist could turn. Her loose sleeves ended just below the elbows. The count's eyes followed the graceful curves of her white forearm with an eagerness that was annoying.

"I prize it more dearly than any other piece in my collection," he said. "It came from Rome. It has a history which I shall try to tell you some day and which makes it almost invaluable. A German nobleman offered me a small fortune if I would part with it."

"And you wouldn't sell it?"

"I was saving it for an occasion, your highness," he said, his steely eyes glittering. "The glad hour has come when I can part with it for a recompense far greater than the baron's gold."

"Oh, isn't it lucky you kept it?" she cried. Then she turned her eyes away quickly, for his gaze seemed greedily endeavoring to pierce through the lace insertion covering her neck and shoulders. Outside the window the steady tramp of the tall guard went on monotonously.

"The recompense of a sweet smile, a tender blush and the unguarded thanks of a pretty woman. The candlestick is yours, Miss Calhoun—if you will repay me for my sacrifice by accepting it without reservation."

Slowly Beverly Calhoun set the candlestick down upon the table, her eyes meeting his with steady disdain.

"What a rare old jester you are, Count Marlanx," she said without a smile. "If I thought you were in earnest I should scream with laughter. May I suggest that we join the countess? We must hurry along, you know. She and I have promised to play tennis with the princess at 3 o'clock." The count's glare of disappointment lasted but a moment. The diplomacy of egotism came to his relief, and he held back the gift for another day, but not for another woman.

"I grieve me to have you hurry away. My afternoon is to be a dull one unless you permit me to watch the tennis game," he said.

"I thought you were interested only in the game of war," she said pointedly.

"I stand in greater awe of a tennis ball than I do of a cannon ball, if it is sent by such an arm as yours," and he not only laid his eyes, but his hand, upon her bare arm. She started as if something had stung her, and a cold shiver raced over her warm flesh. His eyes for the moment held her spellbound. He was drawing the hand to his lips when a shadow darkened the French window, and a saber rattled warningly.

Count Marlanx looked up instantly, a scowl on his face. Baldos stood at the window in an attitude of alert attention. Beverly drew her arm away spasmodically and took a step toward the window. The guard saw by her eyes that she was frightened; but, if his heart beat violently, his face was the picture of military stoniness.

"What are you doing there?" snarled the count.

"Did your highness call?" asked Baldos coolly.

"She did not call, fellow!" said the count, with deadly menace in his voice. "Report to me in half an hour. You still have something to learn, I see." Beverly was alarmed by the threat in his tones. She saw what was in store for Baldos, for she knew quite as well as Marlanx that the guard had deliberately intervened in her behalf.

"He cannot come in half an hour!" she cried quickly. "I have something for him to do, Count Marlanx. Besides, I think I did call." Both men stared at her.

"My ears are excellent," said Marlanx stiffly.

"I fancy Baldos' must be even better, for he heard me," said Beverly, herself once more. The shadow of a smile crossed the face of the guard.

"He is impertinent, insolent, your highness. You will report to me tomorrow, sir, at 9 o'clock in Colonel Quinnox's quarters. Now, go!" commanded the count.

"Wait a minute, Baldos. We are going out too. Will you open that window for me?" Baldos gladly took it as a command and threw open the long French window. She gave him a grateful glance as she stepped through, and he could scarcely conceal the gleam of joy that shot into his own eyes. The dark scowl on the count's face made absolutely no impression upon him. He closed the window and followed ten paces behind the couple.

"Your guard is a priceless treasure," said the count grimly.

"That's what you said about the candlestick," said she sweetly.

She was disturbed by his threat to reprimand Baldos. For some time her mind had been struggling with what the count had said about "the lesson." It grew upon her that her friend had been bullied and humiliated, perhaps in the presence of spectators. Resentment fired her curiosity into action. While the general was explaining one of the new gun carriages to the countess Beverly walked deliberately over to where Baldos was standing. Haddan's knowledge of English was exceedingly limited, and he could understand but little of the rapid conversation. Standing squarely in front of Baldos, she questioned him in low tones.

"What did he mean when he said he had given you a lesson?" she demanded. His eyes gleamed merrily.

"He meant to alarm your highness."

"Didn't he give you a talking to?"

"He coached me in ethics."

"You are evading the question, sir. Was he mean and nasty to you? Tell me; I want to know."

"Well, he said things that a soldier must endure. A civilian or an equal might have run him through for it, your highness." A flush rose to his cheeks, and his lips quivered ever so slightly. But Beverly saw and understood. Her heart was in her eyes.

"That settles it," she said rigidly. "You are not to report to him at 9 tomorrow."

"But he will have me shot, your highness," said he glady.

"He will do nothing of the kind. You are my guard." And her eyes were gleaming dangerously. Then she rejoined the group, the members of which had been watching her curiously.

"Count Marlanx," she said, with entrancing smiles, "will you report to me at 9 tomorrow morning?"

"I have an appointment," he said slowly, but with understanding.

"But you will break it, I am sure," she asserted confidently. "I want to give you a lesson in—in lawn tennis."

Later on, when the victoria was well away from the fort, Dagmar took her

companion to task for holding in public friendly discourse with a member of the guard, whoever he might be.

"It is altogether contrary to custom and"—But Beverly put her hand over the critical lips and smiled like a guilty child.

"Now, don't scold," she pleaded, and the countess could go no further.

The following morning Count Marlanx reported at 9 o'clock with much better grace than he had suspected himself capable of exercising. What she taught him of tennis on the royal courts in the presence of an amused audience was as nothing to what he learned of strategy as it can be practiced by a whimsical girl. Almost before he knew it she had won exemption for Baldos, that being the stake for the first set of singles. To his credit, the count was game. He took the wager, knowing that he in his ignorance could not win from the blithe young expert in petticoats. Then he offered to wager the brass candlestick against her bracelet. She considered for a moment and then in a spirit of enthusiasm accepted the proposition. After all, she coveted the candlestick. Half an hour later an orderly was riding to the fort with instructions to return at once with Miss Calhoun's candlestick. It is on record that they were "love" sets, which goes to prove that Beverly took no chances.

Count Marlanx, puffing and perspiring, his joints dismayed and his brain confused, rode away at noon with Baron Dangloss. Beverly, quite happy in her complete victory, enjoyed a nap of profound sweetness and then was ready for her walk with the princess. They were strolling leisurely about the beautiful grounds, safe in the shade of the trees from the heat of the July sun, when Baron Dangloss approached.

"Your royal highness," he began, with his fierce smile, "may I beg a moment's audience?"

"It has to do with Baldos, I'll take oath," said Beverly with conviction.

"Yes, with your guard. Yesterday he visited the fortress. He went in an official capacity. It is true, but he was privileged to study the secrets of our defense with alarming freedom. It would not surprise me to find that this stranger has learned everything there is to know about the fort." His listeners were silent. The smiles left their faces. "I am not saying that he would betray us."

"No, no!" protested Beverly.

"—but he is in a position to give the most valuable information to an enemy. An officer has just informed me that Baldos missed not a detail in regard to the armament or the location of vital spots in the construction of the fortress."

"But he wouldn't be so base as to use his knowledge to our undoing!" cried Yvette seriously.

"We only know that he is not one of us. It is not beyond reason that his allegiance is to another power—Dangloss, for instance. Count Marlanx is not at all in sympathy with him, you are aware. He is convinced that Bal-

dos is a man of consequence, possibly one of our bitterest enemies, and he hates him. For my own part, I may say that I like the man. I believe he is to be trusted, but if he be an agent of Volga or Gabriel, his opportunity has come. He is in a position to make accurate maps of the fort and of all our masked fortifications along the city walls." Beyond a doubt the baron was worried.

"Neither am I one of you," said Beverly stoutly. "Why shouldn't I prove to be a traitress?"

"You have no quarrel with us, Miss Calhoun," said Dangloss.

"If anything happens, then, I am to be blamed for it!" she cried in deep distress. "I brought him to Edelweiss, and I believe in him."

"For his own sake, your highness, and, Miss Calhoun, I suggest that no opportunity should be given him to communicate with the outside world. We cannot accuse him, of course, but we can protect him. I come to ask your permission to have him detailed for duty only in places where no suspicion can attach to any of his actions."

"You mean inside the city walls?" asked Yvette.

"Yes, your highness, and as far as possible from the fortress."

"I think it is a wise precaution. Don't be angry, Beverly," the princess said gently. "It is for his own sake, you see. I am acting on the presumption that he is wholly innocent of any desire to betray us."

"It would be easy for some one high in position to accuse and convict him," said Dangloss meaningly.

"And it would be just like some one, too," agreed Beverly, her thoughts, with the others, going toward none but one man "high in power."

Later in the day she called Baldos

to her side as they were riding in the castle avenue. She was determined to try a little experiment of her own.

"Baldos, what do you think of the fortress?" she asked.

"I could overthrow it after half an hour's bombardment, your highness," he answered without thinking. She started violently.

"Is it possible? Are there so many weak points?" she went on, catching her breath.

"There are three vital points of weakness, your highness. The magazine can be reached from the outside if one knows the lay of the land, the parade ground exposes the ammunition building to certain disadvantages and the big guns could be silenced in an hour if an enemy had the sense first to bombard from the elevation northeast of the city."

"Good heavens!" gasped poor Beverly. "Have you studied all this out?"

"I was once a real soldier, your highness," he said simply. "It was impossible for me not to see the defects in your fort."

"You—you haven't told any one of this, have you?" she cried, white-faced and anxious.

"No one but your highness. You do not employ me as a talebearer, I trust."

"I did not mean to question your honor," she said. "Would you mind going before the heads of the war department and telling them just what you have told me? I mean about the weak spots."

"If it is your command, your highness," he said quietly, but he was surprised.

"You may expect to be summoned, then, so hold yourself in readiness. And Baldos—"

"Yes, your highness?"

"You need say nothing to them of our having talked the matter over beforehand—unless they pin you down to it, you know."

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CHAPTER XV.

A FEW hours later all was dark and silent within the castle. On the stone walks below the steady tread of sentinels rose on the still air. In the hallways the trusted guardsmen glided about like specters or stood like statues. An hour before the great edifice had been bright and full of animation. Now it slumbered.

It was 2 o'clock. The breath of roses scented the air; the gurgle of fountains was the only music that touched the ear. Beverly Calhoun, dismissing Aunt Fanny, stepped from her window out upon the great stone balcony. A rich oriental dressing gown, loose and comfortable, was her costume. Something told her that sleep would be a long time coming, and an hour in the warm, delightful atmosphere of the night was more attractive than the close, sleepless silence of her own room. Every window along the balcony was dark, proving that the entire household had retired to rest.

She was troubled. The fear had entered her head that the castle folk were regretting the advent of Baldos, that every one was questioning the wisdom of his being in the position he occupied through her devices. Her talk with him did much to upset her tranquillity. That he knew so much of the fortress bore out the subtle suspicions of Dangloss and perhaps others. She was troubled, not that she doubted him, but that if anything went wrong an accusation against him, however unjust, would be difficult to overcome. And she would be to blame in a large degree.

For many minutes she sat in the dark shadow of a great pillar, her elbows upon the cool balustrade, staring dreamily into the star studded vault above. Far away in the air she could see the tiny yellow lights of the monastery, lonely sentinel on the mountain top. From the heights near that abode of peace and penitence an enemy could destroy the fortress to the south. Had not Baldos told her so? One big gun would do the work if it could be taken to that altitude. Baldos could draw a perfect map of the fortress.

He could tell precisely where the shells should fall. And already the chief men in Edelweiss were wondering who he was and to what end he might utilize his knowledge. They were watching him; they were warning her.

For the first time since she came to the castle she felt a sense of loneliness, a certain unhappiness. She could not shake off the feeling that she was, after all, alone in her belief in Baldos. Her heart told her that the tall, straightforward fellow she had met in the hills was as honest as the day. She was deceiving him, she realized, but he was misleading no one. Off in a distant part of the castle ground she could see the long square shadow that marked the location of the barracks and mess room. There he was sleeping, confidently believing in her and her power to save him from all harm. Something in her soul cried out to him that she would be stanch and true and that he might sleep without a tremor of apprehensiveness.

Suddenly she smiled nervously and drew back into the shadow of the pillar. It occurred to her that he might be looking across the moonlit park, looking directly at her through all that shadowy distance. She was conscious of a strange glow in her cheeks and a quickening of the blood as she pulled the folds of her gown across her bare throat.

"Not the moon, nor the stars, nor the light in St. Valentine's, but the black thing away off there on the earth," said a soft voice behind her, and Beverly started as if the supernatural had approached her. She turned to face the princess, who stood almost at her side.

"Yvonne! How did you get here?"

"That is what you are looking at, dear," went on Yvonne as if completing her charge. "Why are you not in bed?"

"And you? I thought you were asleep long ago," murmured Beverly, abominating the guilty feeling that came over her. The princess thrust her arm about Beverly's shoulder.

"I have been watching you for half an hour," she said gently. "Can't you look at the moon and stars as well as one? Isn't it my grim old castle? Let us sit here together, dear, and dream awhile."

"You dear Yvonne," and Beverly drew her down beside her on the cushion. "But listen, I want you to get something out of your head. I was looking at anything in particular."

"Beverly, I believe you were thinking of Baldos," said the other, her fingers straying fondly across the girl's soft hair.

"Ridiculous!" said Beverly, conscious for the first time that he was smiling out of her thoughts. The realization came like a blow, and her eyes grew very wide out there in the darkness.

"And you are troubled on his account. I know it, dear. You—"

"Well, Yvonne, why shouldn't I be worried? I brought him here against his will," protested Beverly. "If anything should happen to him—"

"Don't be afraid, Beverly. I have much confidence in him as you have. His eyes are true. Grenfell believes in him, too, and so does Mr. Anguish. Gren says he would swear by him, no matter who he is."

"But the others?" Beverly whispered.

"Baron Dangloss is his friend and he is Quinnox. They know a man, the count is different."

"I loathe that old wretch!"

"Hush! He has not wronged you in any way."

"But he has been unfair and mean to Baldos."

"It is a soldier's lot, my dear."

"But he may be Prince Danton's son, Frederic or the other one, don't you know," argued Beverly, clenching her hands firmly.

"In that event he would be an honorable soldier, and we have nothing to fear in him. Neither of them is an enemy. It is the possibility that he is not one of them that makes his presence here look dangerous."

"I don't want to talk about him," said Beverly, but she was disappointed when the princess obligingly changed the subject.

Baldos was not surprised, scarcely more than interested, when, a day or two later, he was summoned to appear before the board of strategy. If any one had told him, however, that on a recent night a pair of dreamy gray eyes had tried to find his window in the great black shadow he might have jumped in amazement and delight. For at that very hour he was looking off toward the castle, and his thoughts were of the girl who drew back into the shadow of the pillar.

The Graustark ministry had received news from the southern frontier. Messengers came in with the alarming and significant report that Dawsberg was strengthening her fortifications in the passes and moving war supplies northward. It meant that Gabriel and his people expected a fight and were preparing for it. Count Halfont hastily called the ministers together, and Lorry and the princess took part in their deliberations. General Marlanx represented the army, and it was he who finally asked to have Baldos brought before the council.

The Iron Count plainly intimated that the new guard was in a position to transmit valuable information to the enemy. Colonel Quinnox sent for him, and Baldos was soon standing in the presence of Yvonne and her advisers. He looked about him with a singular smile. The one whom he was summoned to regard as the princess was not at the council chamber. Lorry opened the examination at the request of Count Halfont, the premier. Baldos quietly answered the questions concerning his present position, his age, his term of enlistment and his interpretations of the obligations required of him.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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