

BEVERLY OF GRAUSTARK

By George Barr McCutcheon.

Author of "Graustark"

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"I will some day give my life to repay you for those words, your highness," he said. Her hand was resting on the side of the chair. Something warm touched it, and then it was lifted resistlessly. Hot, passionate lips burned themselves into the white fingers, and a glow went into every fiber of her body.

"Oh!" was all she could say. He gently released the hand and threw up his chin resolutely.

"I am almost ready to die," he said. She laughed for the first time since they entered the park.

"I don't know how to treat you," she said in a helpless flutter. "You know a princess has many trials in life."

"Not the least of which is womanhood."

"Baldos," she said after a long pause. Something very disagreeable had just rushed into her brain. "Have you been forgetting all this time that the Princess Yette is the wife of Grenfall Lorry?"

"It has never left my mind for an instant. From the bottom of my heart I congratulate him. His wife is an angel as well as a princess."

"Well, in the code of morals, is it quite proper to be so loyal to another man's wife?" she asked, and then she trembled. He was supposed to know her as the wife of Grenfall Lorry, and yet he had boldly shown his love for her.

"It depends altogether on the other man's wife," he said, and she looked up quickly. It was too dark to see his face, but something told her to press the point no further. Deep down in her heart she was beginning to rejoice in the belief that he had found her out. If he still believed her to be the real princess, then he was—but the subject of conversation at least had to be changed.

"You say your message to Ravone was of a purely personal nature," she said.

"Yes, your highness." She did not like the way in which he said "your highness." It sounded as if he meant it.

"How did you know that you were to see him today?"

"We have waited for this opportunity since last week. Franz was in the castle grounds last Thursday."

"Good heavens! You don't mean it?"

"Yes, your highness. He carried a message to me from Ravone. That is

it was quite a surprise, as I expected the message. His hand closed over hers and the note, and he bent close once more.

"My only fear is that the test will make it impossible for me to kiss your hand again," said he in a strained voice. She looked up in surprise.

"Then it is really something dis-"

astrous?"

"I have called it a test, your highness," he responded enigmatically.

"Well, we'll see," she said and forthwith turned her eyes to the all important paper. A quick flash crossed her brow; her eyes blinked hopelessly.

The note was written in the Graustark language!

"I'll read it later, Baldos. This is no place for me to be reading notes, don't you know; really, it isn't. I'll give it back to you tomorrow," she was in haste to say.

An inscrutable smile came over his face.

"Ravone's information is correct, I am now convinced," he said slowly.

"Pray, your highness, glance over it now, that I may destroy it at once," he persisted.

"The light isn't good."

"It seems excellent."

"And I never saw such a miserable scrawl as this. He must have written it on horseback, and at full gallop."

"It is quite legible, your highness."

"I really cannot read the stuff. You know his handwriting. Read it to me. I'll trust you to read it carefully."

"This is embarrassing, your highness, but I obey, of course, if you command. Here is what Ravone says:

"We have fresh proof that she is not the princess, but the American girl. Be exceedingly careful that she does not lead you into any admissions. The Americans are tricky. Have little to say to her and guard your tongue well. We are all well and are hoping for the best."

CHAPTER XVIII.

BEVERLY was speechless.

"Of course, your highness," said Baldos, deep apology in his voice. "Ravone is woefully misinformed. He is honest in his belief, and you should not misjudge his motives. How he could have been so blind as to confound you with that frisky American girl—but I beg your pardon. She is to be your guest. A thousand pardons, your highness."

She had been struck dumb by the wording of the note, but his apparently sincere apology for his friend set her every emotion into play once more. While he was speaking her wits were forming themselves for conflict. She opened the campaign with a bold attack.

"You—you believe me to be the princess, sure enough, don't you?" But with all her bravery she was not able to look him in the face.

"How can you doubt it, your highness? Would I be serving you in the present capacity if I believed you to be any one else?"

"Ravone's warning has not shaken your faith in me?"

"It has strengthened it. Nothing could alter the facts in the case, I have not, since we left Ganlook, been in doubt as to the identity of my benefactress."

"It seems to me that you are beating around the bush. I'll come straight to the point. How long have you known that I am not the Princess of Graustark?"

"What?" he exclaimed, drawing back in well assumed horror. "Do you mean—are you jesting? I beg of you, do not jest. It is very serious with me."

His alarm was so genuine that she was completely deceived.

"I am not jesting," she half-whispered, turning very cold. "Have you thought all along that I am the princess; that I am Grenfall Lorry's wife?"

"You told me that you were the princess."

"But I've never said that I was—was any one's wife."

There was a piteous appeal in her voice, and he was not slow to notice it and rejoice. Then his heart smote him.

"But what is to become of me if you are not the princess?" he asked after a long pause. "I can no longer serve you. This is my last day in the castle guard."

"You are to go on serving me—I mean you are to retain your place in the service," she hastened to say. "I shall keep my promise to you." How small and humble she was beginning to feel! It did not seem so entertaining after all, this pretty deception of hers. Down in his heart, underneath the gallant exterior, what was his opinion of her? Something was stinging her eyes fiercely, and she closed them to keep back the tears of mortification.

"Miss Calhoun," he said, his manner changing swiftly. "I have felt from the first that you are not the Princess of Graustark. I knew it an hour after I entered Edelweiss. Franz gave me a

note at Ganlook, but I did not read it until I was a member of the guard."

"You have known it so long?" she cried joyously. "And you have trusted me? You have not hated me for deceiving you?"

"I have never ceased to regard you as my sovereign," he said softly.

"But just a moment ago you spoke of me as a frisky American girl," she said resentfully.

"I have used that term but once, while I have said 'your highness' a thousand times. Knowing that you were Miss Calhoun, I could not have meant either."

"I fancy I have no right to criticize you," she humbly admitted. "After all, it does not surprise me that you were not deceived. Only an imbecile could have been fooled all these weeks. Every one said that you were no fool. It seems ridiculous that it should have gone to this length, doesn't it?"

"Not at all, your highness. I am not."

"You have the habit, I see," she smiled.

"I have several months yet to serve as a member of the guard. Besides, I am under orders to regard you as the princess. General Marlanx has given me severe instructions in that respect."

"You are willing to play the game to the end?" she demanded, more gratified than she should have been.

"Assuredly, yes. It is the only safeguard I have. To alter my belief publicly would expose me to—"

"To what, Baldos?"

"To ridicule, for one thing, and to the generous mercies of Count Marlanx. Besides, it would deprive me of the privilege I mentioned a moment ago—the right to kiss your hand, to be your slave and to do homage to the only sovereign I can recognize. Surely, you will not subject me to exile from the only joys that life holds for me. You have sought to deceive me, and I have tried to deceive you. Each has found the other out, so we are quits. May we not now combine forces in the very laudable effort to deceive the world? If the world doesn't know that we know, why, the comedy may be long drawn out and the climax be made the more amusing."

"I'm afraid there was a touch of your old time sarcasm in that remark," she said. "Yes, I am willing to continue the comedy. It seems the safest way to protect you—especially from General Marlanx. No one must ever know, Baldos; it would be absolutely pitiful. I am glad, oh, so glad, that you have known all the time. It relieves my mind and my conscience tremendously."

"Yes," he said gently. "I have known all along that you were not Mr. Lorry's wife." He had divined her thought, and she flushed hotly. "You are still a princess, however. A poor goat hunter can only look upon the rich American girl as a sovereign whom he must worship from far below."

"Oh, I'm not so rich as all that," she cried. "Besides, I think it is time for a general clearing up of mysteries. Are you Prince Dantan, Prince Frederic or that other one—Christal somebody? Come; be fair with me."

"It seems that all Edelweiss looks upon me as a prince in disguise. You found me in the hills."

"No; you found me. I have not forgotten, sir."

"I was a vagabond and a fugitive. My friends are hunted as I am. We have no home. Why every one should suspect me of being a prince I cannot understand. Every roamer in the hills is not a prince. There is a price upon my head, and there is a reward for the capture of every man who was with me in the pass. My name is Paul Baldos, Miss Calhoun. There is no mystery in that. If you were to mention it in a certain city, you would quickly find that the name of Baldos is not unknown to the people who are searching for him. No, your highness; I regret exceedingly that I must destroy the absurd impression that I am of royal blood. Perhaps I am spoiling a pretty romance, but it cannot be helped. I was Baldos the goat hunter; I am now Baldos the guard. Do you think that I would be serving as a Graustark guard if I were any one of the men you mention?"

Beverly listened in wonder and some disappointment, it must be confessed. Somehow a spark of hope was being forever extinguished by this straightforward denial. He was not to be the prince she had seen in dreams. "You are not like any one else," she said. "That is why we thought of you as—as—"

"As one of those unhappy creatures they call princes? Thank fortune, your highness, I am not yet reduced to such straits. My exile will come only when you send me away."

They were silent for a long time. Neither was thinking of the hour or the fact that her absence in the castle could not be unnoticed. Night had fallen heavily upon the earth. The two faithful chair bearers, respectful, but with wonder in their souls, stood afar off and waited. Baldos and Beverly were alone in their own little world.

"I think I liked you better when you wore the red feather and that horrid patch of black," she said musingly.

"And was a free hearted vagabond," he added, something imploring in his voice.

"An independent courtier, if you please, sir," she said severely.

"Do you want me to go back to the hills? I have the patch and the feather, and my friends are—"

"No! Don't suggest such a thing—yet." She began the protest eagerly and ended it in confusion.

"What you mean that some day Baldos is not unlikely?"

"You don't expect to be a guard all your life, do you?"

"Not to serve the Princess of Graustark, I confess. My aim is much higher. If God lets me choose the crown I would serve I would enlist for life. The crown I would serve is wrought of love, the thorn I would kneel before is a heart, the scepter I would follow is in the slender hand of a woman. I could live and die in the service of my own choosing, but I am only the humble goat hunter, whose hopes are phantoms, whose ideals are conceived in impossibility."

"That was beautiful," murmured Beverly, looking up, fascinated for the moment.

"Oh, that I had the courage to enlist," he cried, bending low once more. She felt the danger in his voice, half tremulous with something more than loyalty, and drew her hand away from a place of instant jeopardy. It was fire that she was playing with, she realized with a start of consciousness. Sweet as the spell had grown to be she saw that it must be shattered.

"It is getting frightfully late," she sharply exclaimed. "They'll wonder where I've gone to. Why, it's actually dark!"

"It has been dark for half an hour, your highness," said he, drawing himself up with sudden rigidity that distressed her. "Are you going to return to the castle?"

"Yes. They'll have out a searching party pretty soon if I don't appear."

"You have been good to me today," he said thoughtfully. "I shall try to merit the kindness. Let me—"

"Oh, please don't talk in that humble way! It's ridiculous! I'd rather have you absolutely impertinent, I declare upon my honor I would. Don't you remember how you talked when you wore the red feather? Well, I liked it."

Baldos laughed easily, happily. His heart was not very humble, though his voice and manner were.

"Red is the color of insolence, you mean."

"It's a good deal jauntier than blue," she declared.

"Before you call the bearers, Miss—your highness, I wish to retract something I said awhile ago," he said very seriously.

"I should think you would," she responded, utterly misinterpreting his intent.

"You asked me to tell you what my message to Ravone contained and I refused. Subsequently the extent of his message to me led us into a most thorough understanding. It is only just and right that you should know what I said to him."

"I trust you, Baldos," she protested simply.

"That is why I tell this to you. Yesterday, your highness, the castle guard received their month's pay. You may not know how well we are paid, so I will say that it is 10 gnavos to each. The envelope which I gave to Ravone contained my wages for the past six weeks. They need it far more than I do. There was also a short note of good cheer to those poor comrades of mine and the assurance that one day our luck may change and starvation be succeeded by plenty. And still more, I told him that I knew you to be Miss Calhoun and that you were my angel of inspiration. That was all, your highness."

"Thank you, Baldos, for telling me," she said softly. "You have made me ashamed of myself."

"On the contrary, I fear that I have been indulging in mock heroics. Truth and egotism, like a salad, require a certain amount of dressing."

"Since you are Baldos and not a fairy prince I think you may instruct the men to carry me back, being without the magic tapestry which could transplant me in a whiff. Goodness, who's that?"

Within ten feet of the sedan chair and directly behind the tall guard stood a small group of people. He and Beverly, engrossed in each other, had not heard their approach. How long they had been silent spectators of the little scene only the intruders knew. The startled, abashed eyes of the girl in the chair were not long in distinguishing the newcomers. A pace in front of the others stood the gaunt, shadowy form of Count Marlanx.

Behind him were the Princess Yette, the old prime minister and Baron Dangloss.

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will tell you all about it later on. It was all due to Count Marlanx."

"It was all done to humiliate me," replied Beverly, indignation surpassing confusion at last. "I hate all of you."

"Oh, Beverly!" whispered the princess in distress.

"Well, perhaps you were led into it," retraced Beverly, half mollified. "Look at that old villain whispering over there. No wonder his wives up and died. They just had to do it. I hate all—but you and Count Halfont and Baron Dangloss," which left but one condemned.

"And Baldos?" added Yette, patting her hand.

"I wish you'd be sensible," cried Beverly most ungraciously, and Yette's soft laugh irritated her. "How long had you been listening to us?"

"Not so much as the tiniest part of a minute," said Yette, receding another disastrous eavesdropping. "I am much wiser than when Baldos first came to serve you. We were quite a distance behind Count Marlanx, I assure you."

"Then he heard something?" asked Beverly anxiously.

"He has been in a detestable mood ever since we rejoined him. Could he have heard anything disagreeable?"

"No; on the contrary, it was quite agreeable."

All this time Baldos was standing at attention a few paces off, a model soldier despite the angry shifting of his black eyes. He saw that they had been caught in a most unfortunate position. No amount of explaining could remove the impression that had been forced upon the witnesses, voluntary or involuntary, as the case might be. Baldos could do nothing to help her, while she was compelled to face the suspicions of her best friends. At best it could be considered nothing short of a clandestine meeting, the consequences of which she must suffer, not he. In his heated brain he was beginning to picture scandal with all the disgusting details that grow out of evil misrepresentation.

Count Halfont separated himself from the group of three and advanced to the sedan chair. Marlanx and Dangloss were arguing earnestly in low tones.

"Shall we return, your highness?" asked Halfont, addressing both with one of his rarest smiles. "If I remember aright, we were to dine en famille tonight, and it is well upon the hour. Besides, Count Marlanx is a little distressed by your absentmindedness, Miss Beverly, and I fancy he is eager to have it out with you."

"My absentmindedness? What is it that I have forgotten?" asked Beverly, puckering her brow.

"That's the trouble, dear," said Yette. "You forgot your promise to teach him how to play that awful game called poker. He has waited for you at the castle since 6 o'clock. It is now 8. Is it any wonder that he led the searching party? He has been on nettles for an hour and a half."

"Goodness, I'll wager he's in a temper!" exclaimed Beverly, with no remorse, but some apprehension.

"It would be wisdom to apologize to him," suggested Yette, and her uncle nodded earnestly.

"All right. I think I can get him into good humor without half trying. Oh, Count Marlanx! Come here, please. You aren't angry with me, are you? Wasn't it awful for me to run away and leave you to play solitaire instead of poker? But, don't you know, I was so wretchedly tired after the ride, and I knew you wouldn't mind if I—"

and so she ran glibly on, completely forestalling him, to the secret amusement of the others. Nevertheless, she was nervous and embarrassed over the situation. There was every reason to fear that the Iron Count had heard and seen enough to form a pretty good opinion of what had passed between herself and Baldos in this remote corner of the park. A deep sense of shame was taking possession of her.

Marlanx, smiling significantly, looked into her brave little face and permitted her to talk on until she had run out of breath and composure. Then he bowed with exaggerated gallantry and informed her that he was hers to command and that it was not for him to forgive, but to accept whatever was her gracious pleasure. He called upon the chair bearers, and they took up their burden. Beverly promptly changed her mind and concluded to walk to the castle. And so they started off, the chair going ahead as if out of commission forever. Despite her efforts to do so the American girl—feeling very much abused by the way—was unsuccessful in the attempt to keep the princess at her side. Yette deliberately walked ahead with Halfont and Dangloss. It seemed to Beverly that they walked unnecessarily fast and that Marlanx was provokingly slow. Baldos was twenty paces behind, as was his custom.

"Is it necessary for me to ask you to double the number of lessons I am to have?" Marlanx asked. He was quite too close to her side to please Beverly.

"Can't you learn in one lesson? Most Americans think they know all about poker after the first game."

"I am not so quick witted, your highness."

"Far be it from me to accelerate your wits, Count Marlanx. It might not be profitable."

"You might profit by losing, you know," he ventured, leaning still closer.

"Poker is not the only game of chance. It was chance that gave me a winning hand this evening."

"I don't understand."

"It shall be my pleasure to teach you in return for instructions I am to have. I have tried to teach your excellent guard one phase of the game. He has not profited, I fear. He has been blind enough to pick a losing hand in spite of my advice. It is the game of hearts." Beverly could not but understand. She shrank away