BEVERLY OF GRAUSTARK

By George Barr McCutcheon.

Author of "Graustark"

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Like a flash she picked up the mutton and sprang out of his way. Capture or worse seemed certain, but her heart did not fail her.

"Put up your sword! You are under arrest!" came from the foremost of the two. He had heard enough of Baldos' skill with the sword to hope that the ruse might be successful and that he would surrender peaceably to numbers.

"One!" cried Baldos.

The men's instructions were to take their quarry alive if possible. The reward for the man living exceeded that for him dead.

Baldos instantly recognized them as spies employed by Marlanx. They had been dogging his footsteps for days and even had tried to murder him. The desire for vengeance was working like madness in his blood. He was overjoyed at having them at the point of his sword. Beverly's presence vouchsafed that he would show little mercy.

"Arrest me, you cowardly curs!" he exclaimed. "Never!" With a spring to one side he quickly overturned one of the casks, and, pushing it in front of him, it served as a rolling bulwark, preventing a joint attack.

"You first!" he cried coolly as his sword met that of the leader. The unhappy wretch was no match for the finest swordsman in Graustark. He made a few desperate attemps to ward off his inevitable fate, calling loudly for his comrade to aid him. The latter was eager enough, but Baldos' strategic roll of the cask effectively prevented him from taking a hand. With a vicious thrust the blade of the goat hunter tore clean through the man's chest and touched the wall behind.

"One!" cried Baldos, gloating in the chance that had come to him. The man gasped and fell. He was none too quick in withdrawing his dripping weapon, for the second man was over the obstacle and upon him.

CHAPTER XXV.

"HOLD the lantern higher, Bev"—In the fury of the fight he remembered the risk and importance of not mentioning her name and stopped short. He was fighting fast, but warily, for he realized that his present adversary was no mean one. As the swords played back and forth in fierce thrusts and parries he spoke assuringly to Beverly: "Don't be frightened! As soon as I finish with this fellow we will go on! Ah! Bravo! Well parried, my man! How the deuce could such a swordsman as you become a cutthroat of Marlanx?"

Beverly had been standing still all this time, holding the light high above her head, according to her lover's orders, for she knew now that such he was and that she loved him with all her heart. She was a weird picture standing there as she watched Baldos fighting for their lives, her beautiful face deathlike in its pallor. Not a cry escaped her lips as the sword blades swished and clashed. She could hear the deep breathing of the combatants in that tomb-like passage.

Suddenly she started and listened keenly. From behind her, back there in the darkness, hurried footsteps were unmistakably approaching. What she had heard, then, was not the scurrying of a rat. Some one was following them. A terrible anguish seized her. Louder and nearer came the heavy steps. "Oh, Baldos!" she screamed in terror. "Another is coming!"

"Have no fear, dear one!" he sung out gayly. His voice was infinitely more cheerful than he felt, for he realized only too well the desperate situation. He was penned in and forced to meet an attack from front and rear. He fell upon his assailant with redoubled fury, aiming to finish him before the newcomer could give aid.

From out of the gloom came a fiendish laugh. Instantly the dark figure of a man appeared, his face completely hidden by a broad slouch hat and the long cloak which enveloped him. A sardonic voice hissed: "Trapped at last! My lady and her lover thought to escape, did they!" The voice was unfamiliar, but the atmosphere seemed charged with Marlanx. "Kill him, Zem!" he shouted. "Don't let him escape you! I will take care of the little witch, never fear!" He clutched at the girl and tried to draw her to him.

"Marlanx! By all the gods!" cried Baldos in despair. He had wounded his man several times, though not seriously. He dared not turn to Beverly's aid.

The scene was thrilling, grewsome. Within this narrow, dimly lighted underground passage, with its musty walls sweating with dampness and thick with the tangled meshes of the spider's web, a brave girl and her lover struggled and fought back to back.

To her dismay, Beverly saw the point of a sword at her throat.

"Out of the way, girl!" the man in the cloak snarled, furious at her resistance. "You die as well as your lover unless you surrender. He cannot escape me."

"And if I refuse!" cried the girl, trying desperately to gain time.

"I will drive my blade through your heart and tell the world it was the deed of your lover."

Baldos groaned. His adversary, encouraged by the change in the situation, pressed him sorely.

"Don't you dare to touch me, Count Marlanx, I know you!" she hissed. "I know what you would do with me. It is not for Graustark that you seek his life."

The sword came nearer. The words died in her throat. She grew faint. Terror paralyzed her. Suddenly her heart gave a great thump of joy. The resourcefulness of the trapped was surging to her relief. The valor of the south leaped into life. The exhilaration of conflict beat down all her fears. "Take away that sword, then, please!" she cried, her voice trembling, but not with terror now. It was exultation. "Will you promise to spare his life? Will you swear to let him go, if I"—

"No, no; never! God forbid!" implored Baldos.

"Ha, ha!" chuckled the man in the cloak. "Spare his life! Oh, yes, after my master has reveled in your charms. How do you like that, my handsome goat hunter?"

"You infernal scoundrel! I'll settle you yet!" Baldos fairly fumed with rage. Gathering himself together for a final effort, he rushed madly on his rapidly weakening antagonist.

"Baldos," she cried hopelessly and in a tone of resignation, "I must do it! It is the only way!"

The man in the cloak as well as Baldos was deceived by the girl's cry. He immediately lowered his sword. The lantern dropped from Beverly's hands and clattered to the floor. At the same instant she drew from her pocket her revolver, which she had placed there before leaving the castle, and fired point blank at him. The report sounded like a thunderclap in their ears. It was followed quickly by a sharp cry and imprecation from the lips of her persecutor, who fell, striking his head with a terrible force on the stones.

Simultaneously there was a groan and the noise of a limp body slipping to the ground, and Baldos, victor at last, turned in fear and trembling to find Beverly standing unhurt staring at the black mass at her feet.

"Thank God, you are safe!" Grasping her hand he led her out of the darkness into the moonlight.

Not a word was spoken as they ran swiftly on until they reached a little clump of trees not far from one of the gates. Here Baldos gently released her hand. She was panting for breath, but he realized she must not be allowed to risk a moment's delay. She must pass the sentry at once.

"Have you the watchword?" he eagerly asked.

"Watchword?" she repeated feebly.

"Yes, the countersign for the night. It is Ganlook. Keep your face well covered with your hood. Advance boldly to the gates and give the word. There will be no trouble. The guard is used to pleasure seekers returning at all hours of night."

"Is he dead?" she asked timorously, returning to the scene of horror.

"Only wounded, I think, as are the other men, though they all deserve death."

He went with her as close to the gate as he thought safe. Taking her hand he kissed it fervently. "Goodby! It won't be for long!" and disappeared.

She stood still and lifeless, staring after him, for ages, it seemed. He was gone. Gone forever, no doubt. Her eyes grew wilder and wilder with the pity of it all. Pride fled incontinently. She longed to call him back. Then it occurred to her that he was hurrying off to that other woman. No, he said he would return. She must be brave, true to herself, whatever happened. She marched boldly up to the gate, gave the countersign and passed through, not heeding the curious glances cast upon her by the sentry, turned into the castle, up the grand staircase and fled to the princess' bedchamber.

Beverly, trembling and sobbing, threw herself in the arms of the princess. Incoherently she related all that had happened, then swooned.

After she had been restored, the promise of Yetive to protect her, whatever happened, comforted her somewhat.

"It must have been Marlanx," moaned Beverly.

"Who else could it have been?" replied the princess, who was visibly excited.

Summoning all her courage, she went on: "First, we must find out if he is badly hurt. We'll trust to luck. Cheer up!" She touched a bell. There came a knock at the door. A guard was told to enter. "Ellos," she exclaimed, "did you hear a shot fired a short time ago?"

"I thought I did, your highness, but was not sure."

"Baldos, the guard, was escaping by the secret passage," continued the princess, a wonderful inspiration coming to her rescue. "He passed through the chapel. Miss Calhoun was there. Alone and single handed she tried to prevent him. It was her duty. He refused to obey her command to stop, and she followed him into the tunnel and fired at him. I'm afraid you are too late to capture him, but you may—oh, Beverly, how plucky you were to follow him! Go quickly, Ellos! Search the tunnel and report at once." As the guard saluted with wonder, admiration and unbelief he saw the two conspirators locked in each other's arms.

Presently he returned and reported that the guards could find no trace of any one in the tunnel, but that they found blood on the floor near the exit and that the door was wide open.

The two girls looked at each other in amazement. They were dumfounded, but a great relief was glowing in their eyes.

"Ellos," inquired the princess, considerably less agitated, "does any one else know of this?"

"No, your highness; there was no one on guard but Max, Baldos and myself."

"Well, for the present no one else must know of his flight. Do you understand? Not a word to any one. I myself will explain when the proper time comes. You and Max have been very careless, but I suppose you should not be punished. He has tricked us all. Send Max to me at once."

"Yes, your highness," said Ellos, and he went away with his head swimming. Max, the other guard, received like orders, and then the two young women sank limply upon a divan.

"Oh, how clever you are, Yetive," came from the American girl. "But what next?"

"We may expect to hear something disagreeable from Count Marlanx, my dear," murmured the perplexed but confident princess, "but I think we have the game in our own hands, as you would say in America."

CHAPTER XXVI.

"AUNT FANNY, what is that white thing sticking under the window?" demanded Beverly late the next morning. She was sitting with her face to the windows while the old negress dressed her hair.

"Looks lak a love letteh, Miss Bev'ly," was the answer as Aunt Fanny gingerly placed an envelope in her mistress' hand. Beverly looked at it in amazement. It was unmistakably a letter, addressed to her, which had been left at her window some time in the night. Her heart gave a thump, and she went red with anticipated pleasure. With eager fingers she tore open the envelope. The first glance at the contents brought disappointment to her face. The missive was from Count Marlanx, but it was a relief to find that he was very much alive and kicking. As she read on there came a look of perplexity which was succeeded by burning indignation. The man in the cloak was preparing to strike.

Your secret is mine. I know all that happened in the chapel and underground passage. You have betrayed Graustark in aiding this man to escape. The plot was cleverly executed, but you counted without the jealous eye of love. You can save yourself and your honor and perhaps your princess, but the conditions are mine. This time there can be no trifling. I want you to treat me fairly. God help you if you refuse. Give me the answer I want, and your secret is safe. I will shield you with my life. At 11 o'clock I shall come to see you. I have in my possession a document that will influence you. You will do well to keep a close mouth until you have seen this paper.

This alarming note was all that was needed to restore fire to the lagging blood of the American girl. Its effect was decidedly contrary to that which Marlanx must have anticipated. Instead of collapsing, Beverly sprang to her feet with energy and life in every fiber. Her eyes were flashing brightly, her body quivering with the sensations of battle.

"That awful old wretch!" she cried, to Aunt Fanny's amazement. "He is the meanest human being in all the world. But he's making the mistake of his life, isn't he, Aunt Fanny? Oh, of course you don't know what it is, so never mind. We've got a surprise for him. I'll see him at 11 o'clock, and then"— She smiled quite benignly at the thought of what she was going to say to him. Beverly felt very secure in the shadow of the princess.

A clatter of horses' hoofs on the parade ground drew her to the balcony. What she saw brought joy to her heart. Lorry and Anguish, muddy and disheveled, were dismounting before the castle.

"Ah, this is joy! Now there are three good Americans here. I'm not afraid," she said bravely. Aunt Fanny nodded her head in approval, although she did not know what it was all about. Curiosity more than alarm made Beverly eager to see the document which old Marlanx held in reserve for her. She determined to meet him at 11.

A message from the princess announced the unexpected return of the two Americans. She said they were (to use Harry Anguish's own expression) "beastly near starvation" and clamored for substantial breakfasts. Beverly was urged to join them and to hear the latest news from the frontier.

Lorry and Anguish were full of the excitement on which they had lived for many hours. They had found evidence of raids by the Dawsbergen scouts and had even caught sight of a small band of fleeing horsemen. Lorry reluctantly admitted that Gabriel's army seemed loyal to him and that there was small hope of a conflict being averted, as he had surmised, through the defection of the people. He was surprised, but not dismayed, when Yetive told him certain portions of the story in regard to Marlanx; and, by no means averse to seeing the old man relegated to the background, heartily indorsed the step taken by his wife. He was fair enough, however, to promise the general a chance to speak in his own defense if he so desired. He had this in view when he requested Marlanx to come to the castle at 11 o'clock for consultation.

"Gabriel is devoting most of his energy now to hunting that poor Dantan into his grave," said Anguish. "I believe he'd rather kill his half brother than conquer Graustark. Why, the inhuman monster has set himself to the task of obliterating everything that reminds him of Dantan. We learned from spies down there that he issued an order for the death of Dantan's sister, a pretty young thing named Candace, because he believed she was secretly aiding her fugitive brother. She escaped from the palace in Serros a week ago, and no one knows what has become of her. There's a report that she was actually killed and that the story of her flight is a mere blind on the part of Gabriel."

"He would do anything!" cried Yetive. "Poor child! They say she is like her English mother and is charming."

"That would set Gabriel against her, I fancy," went on Anguish. "And, by the way, Miss Calhoun, we heard something definite about your friend, Prince Dantan. It is pretty well settled that he isn't Baldos of the guard. Dantan was seen two days ago by Captain Dangloss' men. He was in the Dawsbergen pass, and they talked with him and his men. There was no mistake this time. The poor, half starved chap confessed to being the prince and begged for food for himself and his followers."

"I tried to find him and, failing in that, left word in the pass that if he would but cast his lot with us in this trouble we soon would restore him to his throne," said Lorry. "He may accept, and we shall have him turning up here some day hungry for revenge. And now, my dear Beverly, how are you progressing with the excellent Baldos, of whom we cannot make a prince, no matter how hard we try?"

Beverly and the princess exchanged glances in which consternation was difficult to conceal. It was clear to Beverly that Yetive had not told her husband of the escape.

"I don't know anything about Baldos," she answered steadily. "Last night some one shot at him in the park."

"The deuce you say!"

"In order to protect him until you returned, Gren, I had him transferred to guard duty inside the castle," explained the princess. "It really seemed necessary. General Marlanx expects to present formal charges against him this morning, so I suppose we shall have to put him in irons for a little while. It seems too bad, doesn't it, Gren?"

"Yes. He's as straight as a string, I'll swear," said Lorry emphatically.

"I'll bet he wishes he were safely out of this place," ventured Anguish, and two young women busied themselves suddenly with their coffee.

"The chance is he's sorry he ever came into it," said Lorry tantalizingly.

While they were waiting for Marlanx the young Duke of Mizrox was announced. The handsome Axphainian came with relief and dismay struggling for mastery in his face.

"Your highness," he said after the greetings, "I am come to inform you that Graustark has one prince less to account for. Axphain has found her fugitive."

"When?" cried the princess and Beverly in one voice and with astonishing eagerness, not unmixed with dismay.

"Three days ago," was the reply.

"Oh," came in deep relief from Beverly as she sank back into her chair. The same fear had lodged in the hearts of the two fair conspirators—that they had freed Baldos only to have him fall into the hands of his deadliest foes.

"I have a message by courier from my uncle in Axphain," said Mizrox. "He says that Frederic was killed near Labbot by soldiers, after making a gallant fight, on last Sunday night. The Princess Volga is rejoicing and has amply rewarded his slayers. Poor Frederic! He knew but little happiness in this life."

There was a full minute of reflection before any of his hearers expressed the thought that had framed itself in every mind.

"Well, since Dantan and Frederic are accounted for, Baldos is absolutely obliged to be Christobal," said Anguish resignedly.

"He's just Baldos," observed Beverly, snuffing out the faint hope that had fingered so long. Then she said to herself: "And I don't care, either. I only wish he were back here again. I'd be a good deal nicer to him."

Messengers flew back and forth, carrying orders from the castle to various quarters. The ministers were called to meet at 12 o'clock. Underneath all the bustle there was a tremendous impulse of American cunning, energy and resourcefulness. Every one caught the fever. Reserved old diplomats were overwhelmed by their own enthusiasm. Custom bound soldiers forgot the hereditary caution and fell into the ways of the new leaders without a murmur. The city was wild with excitement, for all believed that the war was upon them. There was but one shadow overhanging the glorious optimism of Graustark—the ugly, menacing attitude of Axphain. Even the Duke of Mizrox could give no assurance that his country would remain neutral.

Colonel Quinnox came to the castle in haste and perturbation. It was he who propounded the question that Yetive and Beverly were expecting, "Where is Baldos?" Of course the flight of the suspected guard was soon a matter of certainty. A single imploring glance from the princess, meant for the faithful Quinnox alone, told him as plainly as words could have said that she had given the man his freedom. And Quinnox would have died a thousand times to protect the secret of his sovereign, for had not twenty generations of Quinnoxes served the rulers of Graustark with unflinching loyalty? Baron Dangloss may have suspected the trick, but he did not so much as blink when the princess instructed him to hunt high and low for the fugitive.

Marlanx came at 11. Under the defiant calmness of his bearing there was lurking a mighty fear. His brain was scourged by thoughts of impending disgrace. The princess had plainly threatened his degradation. After all these years he was to tremble with shame and humiliation; he was to cringe where he had always boasted of domineering power. And besides all this Marlanx had a bullet wound in his left shoulder! The world could not have known, for he knew how to conceal pain.

He approached the slender, imperious judge in the council chamber with a defiant leer on his face. If he went down into the depths he would drag with him the fairest treasure he had coveted in all his years of lust and desire.

"A word with you," he said in an aside to Beverly as she came from the council chamber, in which she felt she should not sit. She stopped and faced him. Instinctively she looked to see if he bore evidence of a wound. She was positive that her bullet had struck him the night before and that Marlanx was the man with the cloak.

"Well?" she said coldly. He read her thoughts and smiled, even as his shoulder burned with pain.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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			7:15	11:10	3:20	Lv.	DALLAS	Ar.	9:30	1:45	5:15			
			7:34	No Stop	3:39	Ar.	*TEATS	Ar.	No Stop	No Stop	No Stop			
			7:38	No Stop	3:43	Ar.	*GILLIAMS	Ar.	9:02	No Stop	4:47			
Lv.	Lv.	Lv.	7:43	No Stop	3:48	Ar.	*BRIDGEPORT	Ar.	8:57	No Stop	4:42	Ar.	Ar.	Ar.
6:00	9:00	1:30	7:55	11:50	4:00	Ar.	FALLS CITY	Lv.	8:45.	1:00	4:30	8:30	11:45	4:15
6:30	9:30	2:00				Ar.	*BLACK ROCK	Lv.				7:45	11:00	3:30

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