

GRAUSTARK

... By ...
GEORGE BARR McCUTCHEON

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CHAPTER II.

TWO STRANGERS IN A COACH.

LORRY wasted very little time. He dashed into the depot and up to the operator's window.

"What's the nearest station east of here?"

"P—," leisurely answered the agent in some surprise.

"How far is it?"

"Four miles."

"Telegraph ahead and hold the train that just left here."

"The train doesn't stop there."

"It's got to stop there or there'll be more trouble than this road has had since it began business. The conductor pulled out and left two of his passengers—gave out wrong information—and he'll have to hold his train there or bring her back here. If you don't send that order, I'll report you as well as the conductor."

Grenfall's manner was commanding. The agent's impression was that he was important, that he had a right to give orders; but he hesitated.

"There's no way for you but to get to P— anyway," he said while turning the matter over in his mind.

"You stop that train! I'll get there inside of twenty minutes. Now, be quick! Wire them to hold her, or there'll be an order from headquarters for some ninety day lay offs." The agent stared at him, then turned to his instrument, and the message went forward. Lorry rushed out. On the platform he nearly ran over the hurrying figure in the tan coat.

"Pardon me. I'll explain things in a minute," he gasped and dashed away. Her troubled eyes blinked with astonishment.

At the end of the platform stood a mountain coach, along the sides of which was printed in yellow letters, "Happy Springs." The driver was climbing up to his seat, and the cumbersome trap was empty.

"Want to make \$10?" cried Grenfall. "What say?" demanded the driver, half falling to the ground.

"Get me to P— inside of twenty minutes, and I'll give you \$10. Hurry up! Answer!"

"Yes; but, you see, I'm hired to—"

"Oh, that's all right! You'll never make money easier. Can you get us there in twenty minutes?"

"It's four mile, pardner, and not very good road, either. Pile in, and we'll make it or kill old Hip and Jim. Miss the train?"

"Get yourself ready for a race with an express train, and don't ask questions. Kill 'em both if you have to. I'll be back in a second!"

Back to the station he tore. She was standing near the door looking up the track miserably. Already night was falling. Men were lighting the switch lanterns, and the mountains were turning into great dark shadows.

"Come quickly. I have a wagon out here."

Resistlessly she was hurried along and fairly shoved through the open door of the odd looking coach. He was beside her on the seat in an instant, and her bewildered ears heard him say:

"Drive like the very deuce!" Then the door slammed, the driver clattered up to his seat, and the horses were off

with a rush.

"Where are we going?" she demanded, sitting very straight and defiant.

"After that train. I'll tell you all about it when I get my breath. This is to be the quickest escape from a dilemma on record, provided it is an escape." By this time they were bumping along the flinty road at a lively rate, jolting about on the seat in a most disconcerting manner. After a few long, deep breaths he told her how the ride in the Springs hack had been conceived and of the arrangement he had made with the dispatcher. He, furthermore, acquainted her with the cause of his being left when he might have caught the train.

"Just as I reached the track, out of breath, but rejoicing, I remembered having seen you on that side street and knew that you would be left. It would have been heartless to leave you here without protection, so I felt it my duty to let the train go and help you out of a very ugly predicament."

"How can I ever repay you?" she murmured. "It was so good and so thoughtful of you! Oh, I should have died had I been left here alone! Do you not think my uncle will miss me and have the train sent back?" she went on sagely.

"That's so!" he exclaimed, somewhat disconcerted. "But I don't know, either. He may not miss you for a long time, thinking you are in some other car, you know. That could easily happen," triumphantly.

"Can this man get us to the next station in time?" she questioned, looking at the black mountains and the dense foliage. It was now quite dark.

"If he doesn't bump us to death before we get half way there. He's driving like the wind."

"You must let me pay half his bill," she said decidedly from the dark corner in which she was huddling.

He could find no response to this peremptory request.

"The road is growing rougher. If you will allow me to make a suggestion, I think you will see its wisdom. You can escape a great deal of ugly jostling if you will take hold of my arm and cling to it tightly. I will brace myself with this strap. I am sure it will save you many hard bumps."

Without a word she moved to his side and wound her strong little arm about his big one.

"I had thought of that," she said simply. "Thank you." Then, after a moment, while his heart thumped madly, "Had it occurred to you that after you ran so hard you might have climbed aboard the train and ordered the conductor to stop it for me?"

"I—I never thought of that!" he cried confusedly.

"Please do not think me ungrateful. You have been very good to me, a stranger. One often thinks afterward of things one might have done, don't you know? You did the noblest when you inconvenienced yourself for me. What trouble I have made for you!"

"It has been no trouble," he floundered. "An adventure like this is worth no end of—er—inconvenience, as you call it. I'm sure I must have lost my head completely, and I am ashamed of myself. How much anxiety I could

have saved you had I been possessed of an ounce of brains!"

"Hush! I will not allow you to say that. You would have me appear ungrateful when I certainly am not. Ah, how he is driving! Do you think it dangerous?" she cried as the hack gave two or three wild lurches, throwing him into the corner and the girl half upon him.

"Not in the least," he gasped, the breath knocked out of his body. Just the same he was very much alarmed. It was as dark as pitch outside and in, and he could not help wondering how near the edge of the mountain side they were running. A false move of the flying horses, and they might go rolling to the bottom of the ravine, hundreds of feet below. Still he must not let her see his apprehension. "This fellow is considered the best driver in the mountains," he prevaricated.

"Oh, then we need feel no alarm," she said, reassured.

There was such a roaring and clattering that conversation became almost impossible. When either spoke, it was with the mouth close to the ear of the other. At such times Grenfall could feel her breath on his cheek. Her sweet voice went tingling to his toes with every word she uttered. He was in a daze, out of which sang the mad wish that he might clasp her in his arms, kiss her and then go tumbling down the mountain. She trembled in the next fierce lurches, but gave forth no complaint. He knew that she was in terror, but too brave to murmur.

Unable to resist, he released the strap to which he had clung so grimly and placed his strong, firm hand encouragingly over the little one that gripped his arm with the clutch of death. It was very dark and very lonely too.

"Oh!" she cried as his hand clasped hers. "You must hold to the strap."

"It is broken!" he lied gladly. "There's no danger. See, my hand does not tremble, does it? Be calm! It cannot be much farther."

"Will it not be dreadful if the conductor refuses to stop?" she cried, her hand resting calmly beneath its protector. He detected a tone of security in her voice.

"But he will stop. Your uncle will see to that even if the operator fails."

"My uncle will kill him if he does not stop or come back for me," she said complacently.

"I was not wrong," thought Grenfall. "He looks like a duelist. Who the devil are they, anyhow?" Then aloud: "At this rate we'd be able to beat the train to Washington in a straightaway race. Isn't it a delightfully wild ride?"

"I have acquired a great deal of knowledge in America, but this is the first time I have heard your definition of delight. I agree that it is wild."

For some moments there was silence in the noisy conveyance. Outside, the crack of the driver's whip, his hoarse cries and the nerve destroying crash of the wheels produced impressions of a mighty storm rather than of peace and pleasure.

"I am curious to know where you obtained the coin you lost in the car yesterday," she said at last, as if relieving her mind of a question that had been long subdued.

"The one you so kindly found for me?" he asked procrastinatingly.

"Yes. They are certainly rare in this country."

"I never saw a coin like it until after I had seen you," he confessed. He felt her arm press his a little tighter, and there was a quick movement of her head which told him, dark as it was, that she was trying to see his face and that her blue eyes were wide with something more than terror.

"I do not understand," she exclaimed.

"I obtained the coin from a sleeping car porter, who said some one gave it to him and told him to have a 'high time' with it," he explained in her ear.

"He evidently did not care for the

'high time,' she said after a moment. He would have given a fortune for one glimpse of her face at that instant.

"I think he said it would be necessary to go to Europe in order to follow the injunction of the donor. As I am more likely to go to Europe than he, I relieved him of the necessity and bought his right to a 'high time.'"

There was a long pause, during which she attempted to withdraw herself from his side, her little fingers struggling timidly beneath the big ones.

"Are you a collector of coins?" she asked at length, a perceptible coldness in her voice.

"No. I am considered a dispenser of coins. Still, I rather like the idea of possessing this queer bit of money as



"Do you think it dangerous?" a pocket piece. I intend to keep it forever and let it descend as an heirloom to the generations that follow me," he said laughingly. "Why are you so curious about it?"

"Because it comes from the city and country in which I live," she responded. "If you were in a land far from your own, would you not be interested in anything—even a coin—that reminded you of home?"

"Especially if I had not seen one of its kind since leaving home," he replied insinuatingly.

"Oh, but I have seen many like it. In my purse there are several at this minute."

"Isn't it strange that this particular coin should have reminded you of home?"

"You have no right to question me, sir," she said coldly, drawing away, only to be lurched back again. In spite of herself she laughed audibly.

"I beg your pardon," he said tantalizingly.

"When did he give it you?"

"Who?"

"The porter, sir."

"You have no right to question me," he said.

"Oh!" she gasped. "I did not mean to be inquisitive."

"But I grant the right. He gave it me inside of two hours after I first entered the car."

"At Denver?"

"How do you know I got on at Denver?"

"Why you passed me in the aisle with your luggage. Don't you remember?"

Did he remember! His heart almost turned over with the joy of knowing that she had really noticed and remembered him. Involuntarily his glad fingers closed down upon the gloved hand that lay beneath them.

"I believe I do remember, now that you speak of it," he said in a stifled voice. "You were standing at a window."

"Yes, and I saw you kissing those ladies goodby too. Was one of them

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