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Beverly of Graustark

By
**GEORGE BARR
M'CUTCHEON,**
Author of "Graustark"
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(Continued from last week.)

The first stage of the journey by coach had been good fun. They had passed along pleasant roads, through quaint villages and among interesting people, and progress had been rapid. The second stage had presented rather terrifying prospects, and the third day promised even greater vicissitudes. Looking from the coach windows out upon the quiet, desolate grandeur of her surroundings, poor Beverly began to appreciate how abjectly helpless and alone she was. Her companions were ugly, vicious looking men, any one of whom could inspire terror by a look. She had intrusted herself to the care of these strange creatures in the moment of inspired courage, and now she was constrained to regret her action. True, they had proved worthy protectors as far as they had gone, but the very possibilities that lay in their power were appalling, now that she had time to consider the situation.

The officer in charge had been recommended as a trusted servant of the czar; an American consul had secured the escort for her direct from the frontier patrol authorities. Men high in power had vouched for the integrity of the detachment, but all this was forgotten in the mighty solitude of the mountains. She was beginning to fear her escort more than she feared the brigands of the hills.

Treachery seemed printed on their backs as they rode ahead of her. The big officer was ever polite and alert, but she was ready to distrust him on the slightest excuse. These men could not help knowing that she was rich, and it was reasonable for them to suspect that she carried money and jewels with her. In her mind's eye she could picture these traitors rifling her bags and boxes in some dark pass, and then there were other horrors that almost petrified her when she allowed herself to think of them.

Here and there the travelers passed by rude cott where dwelt woodmen and mountaineers, and at long intervals a solitary but picturesque horseman stood aside and gave them the road. As the coach penetrated deeper into the gorge signs of human life and activity became fewer. The sun could not send his light into this shadowy tomb of granite. The rattle of the wheels and the clatter of the horses' hoofs sounded

like a constant crash of thunder in the ears of the tender traveler, a dainty morsel among hawks and wolves.

There was an unmistakable tremor in her voice when she at last found heart to ask the officer where they were to spend the night. It was far past noon, and Aunt Fanny had suggested opening the lunch baskets. One of the guides was called back, the leader being as much in the dark as his charge. "There is no village within twenty miles," he said, "and we must sleep in the pass."

Beverly's voice faltered. "Out here in all this awful!" Then she caught herself quickly. It came to her suddenly that she must not let these men see that she was apprehensive. Her voice was a trifle shrill and her eyes glistened with a strange new light as she went on, changing her tack completely: "How romantic! I've often wanted to do something like this."

The officer looked bewildered and said nothing. Aunt Fanny was speechless. Later on, when the lieutenant had gone ahead to confer with the guides about the suspicious actions of a small troop of horsemen they had seen, Beverly confided to the old negress that she was frightened almost out of her boots, but that she'd die before the men should see a sign of cowardice in a Calhoun. Aunt Fanny was not so proud and imperious. It was with difficulty that her high strung young mistress suppressed the walls that had long been under restraint in Aunt Fanny's huge and turbulent bosom.

"Good Lawd, Miss Bev'ly, dey'll chop us all to pieces an' take ouah jewelry an' money an' clo'es an' ev'rything else we done got about us. Good Lawd, let's tun back, Miss Bev'ly. We ain't got no mo' show out heah in dese mountains dan a!"

"Be still, Aunt Fanny!" commanded Beverly, with a fine show of courage.

"You must be brave. Don't you see we can't turn back? It's just as dangerous and a heap sight more so. If we let on we're not one bit afraid they'll respect us, don't you see, and men never harm women whom they respect."

"Umph!" grunted Aunt Fanny, with exaggerated irony.

"Well, they never do!" maintained Beverly, who was not at all sure about it. "And they look like real nice men

— honest men, even though they have such awful whiskers."

"Dey's de wust trash Ah eveh did see," exploded Aunt Fanny.

"Sh! Don't let them hear you," whispered Beverly.

In spite of her terror and perplexity she was compelled to smile. It was all so like the farce comedies one sees at the theater.

As the officer rode up his face was pale in the shadowy light of the afternoon, and he was plainly very nervous.

"What is the latest news from the front?" she inquired cheerfully.

"The men refuse to ride on," he exclaimed, speaking rapidly, making it still harder for her to understand. "Our advance guard has met a party of hunters from Axphain. They insist that you — the fine lady in the coach — are the Princess Yelive, returning from a secret visit to St. Petersburg, where you went to plead for assistance from the czar."

Beverly Calhoun gasped in astonishment. It was too incredible to believe. It was actually ludicrous. She laughed heartily. "How perfectly absurd."

"I am well aware that you are not the Princess Yelive," he continued emphatically, "but what can I do? The men won't believe me. They swear they have been tricked and are panic stricken over the situation. The hunters tell them that the Axphain authorities, fully aware of the hurried flight of the princess through these wilds, are preparing to intercept her. A large detachment of soldiers is already across the Graustark frontier. It is only a question of time before the 'red legs' will be upon them. I have assured them that their beautiful charge is not the princess, but an American girl, and that there is no mystery about the coach and escort. All in vain. The Axphain guides already feel that their heads are on the block, while as for the Cossacks, not even my dire threats of the awful anger of the white czar when he finds they have disobeyed his commands will move them."

"Speak to your men once more, sir, and promise them big purses of gold when we reach Ganlook. I have no money or valuables with me, but there I can obtain plenty," said Beverly, shrewdly thinking it better that they should believe her to be without funds.

The cavalcade had halted during this colloquy. All the men were ahead conversing sullenly and excitedly with much mutterings. The driver, a stolid creature, seemingly indifferent to all that was going on, awoke remained at his post. The situation, apparently dangerous, was certainly most annoying. But if Beverly could have read the mind of that silent figure on the box she would have felt slightly relieved, for he was infinitely more anxious to proceed than even she, but from far different reasons. He was a Russian convict who had escaped on the way to Siberia. Disguised as a coachman, he was seeking life and safety in Graustark or any out of the way place. It mattered little to him where the escort concluded to go. He was going ahead. He dared not go back; he must go on.

At the end of half an hour the officer returned. All hope had gone from his face. "It is useless!" he cried out. "The guides refuse to proceed. See! They are going off with their countrymen! We are lost without them. I do not know what to do. We cannot get to Ganlook. I do not know the way, and the driver is great. Ah, madam, here they come! The Cossacks are going back."

As he spoke the surly mutineers were riding slowly toward the coach. Every man had his pistol on the high pommel of the saddle. Their faces wore an

ugly look. As they passed the officer one of them, pointing ahead of him with his sword, shouted savagely, "Balak!"

It was conclusive and convincing. They were deserting her.

"Oh, oh, oh! The cowards!" sobbed Beverly in rage and despair. "I must go on! Is it possible that even such men would leave?"

She was interrupted by the voice of the officer, who, raising his cap to her, commanded at the same time the driver to turn his horses and follow the escort to Balak.

"What is that?" demanded Beverly in alarm.

From far off came the sound of firearms. A dozen shots were fired and reverberated down through the gloomy pass ahead of the coach.

"They are fighting somewhere in the hills in front of us," answered the now frightened officer. Turning quickly, he saw the deserting horsemen halt, listen

a minute and then spur their horses. He cried out sharply to the driver: "Come, there! Turn round! We have no time to lose!"

With a savage grin the hitherto motionless driver lurled some insulting remark at the officer, who was already following his men, now in full flight down the road, and, settling himself firmly on the seat, taking a fresh grip of the reins, he yelled to his horses, at the same time lashing them furiously with his whip, and started the coach ahead at a fearful pace. His only thought was to get away as far as possible from the Russian officer, then deliberately desert the coach and its occupants and take to the hills.

CHAPTER IV.

THOROUGHLY mystified by the action of the driver and at length terrified by the pace that he carried them careening along the narrow road, Beverly cried out to him, her voice shrill with alarm. Aunt Fanny was crouching on the floor of the coach between the seats, groaning and praying.

"Stop! Where are you going?" cried Beverly, putting her head recklessly through the window. If the man heard her he gave no evidence of the fact. His face was set forward, and he was guiding the horses with a firm, unquivering hand. The coach rattled and bounded along the dangerous way hewn in the side of the mountain. A misstep or a false turn might easily start the clumsy vehicle rolling down the declivity on the right. The convict was taking desperate chances and, with a cool, calculating brain, prepared to leap to the ground in case of accident and save himself, without a thought for the victims inside.

"Stop! Turn around!" she cried in a frenzy. "We shall be killed. Are you crazy?"

By this time they had struck a descent in the road and were rushing along at breakneck speed into oppressive shadows that bore the first imprints of night. Realizing at last that her cries were falling upon purposely deaf ears, Beverly Calhoun sank back into the seat, weak and terror stricken. It was plain to her that the horses were not running away, for the man had been lashing them furiously. There was but one conclusion—he was deliberately taking her farther into the mountain fastnesses, his purpose known only to himself. A hundred terrors presented themselves to her as she lay huddled against the side of the coach, her eyes closed tightly, her tender body tossed furiously about with the sway of the vehicle. There was the fundamental fear that she would be dashed to death down the side of the mountain, but apart from this her quick brain was evolving all sorts of possible endings—none short of absolute disaster.

Even as she prayed that something might intervene to check the mad rush and to deliver her from the horrors of the moment the raucous voice of the driver was heard calling to his horses, and the pace became slower. The awful rocking and the jolting grew less severe, the clatter resolved itself into a broken rumble, and then the coach stopped with a mighty lurch.

Dragging herself from the corner, poor Beverly Calhoun, no longer a dispirited heroine, gazed piteously out into the shadows, expecting the murderous blade of the driver to meet her as she did so. Pauloff had swung from the box of the coach and was peering first into the woodland below and then upon the rocks to the left. He wore the expression of a man trapped and seeking means of escape. Suddenly he darted behind the coach, almost brushing against Beverly's hat as he passed the window. She opened her lips to call him, but even as she did so he took to his heels and raced back over the road they had traveled so precipitously.

Overcome by surprise and dismay, she only could watch the flight in silence. Less than a hundred feet from where the coach was standing he turned to the right and was lost among the rocks. Ahead, four horses, covered with sweat, were panting and heaving as if in great distress after their mad run. Aunt Fanny was still moaning and praying by turns in the bottom of the carriage. Darkness was settling down upon the pass, and objects a hundred yards away were swallowed by the gloom. There was no sound save the blowing of the tired animals and the moaning of the old negress. Beverly realized with a sinking heart that they were alone and helpless in the mountain, with night upon them.

She never knew where the strength and courage came from, but she forced open the stubborn coach door and scrambled to the ground, looking frantically in all directions for a single sign of hope. In the most despairing terror she had ever experienced she started toward the lead horses, hoping against hope that at least one of her men had remained faithful.

A man stopped quietly from the inner side of the road and advanced with the uncertain tread of one who overcomes by amazement. He was a stranger and wore an odd, uncouth garb. The falling light told her that he was not one of her late protectors. She shrank back with a faint cry of alarm, ready to fly to the protecting arms of hopeless Aunt Fanny if her uncertain legs could carry her. At the same instant another ragged stranger, then two, three, four or five, appeared as if by magic, some near her, others approaching from the shadows.

"Who—who in heaven's name are you?" she faltered. The sound of her own voice in a measure restored the courage that had been paralyzed. Un-

consciously this slim sprig of southern valor threw back her shoulders and lifted her chin. If they were brigands, they should not find her a cowering coward. After all, she was a Calhoun. The man she had first observed stopped near the horses' heads and peered intently at her from beneath a broad and rakish hat. He was tall and appeared to be more respectably clad than his fellows, although there was not one who looked as though he possessed a complete outfit of wearing apparel.

"Poor wayfarers, may it please your highness," replied the tall vagabond, bowing low. To her surprise, he spoke in very good English. His voice was clear, and there was a tinge of polite irony in the tones. "But all people are alike in the mountains. The king and the thief, the princess and the jade live in the common fold." And his hat swung so low that it touched the ground.

"I am powerless. I only implore you to take what valuables you may find and let us proceed unharmed!" she cried rapidly, eager to have it over.

"Pray, how can your highness proceed? You have no guide, no driver, no escort," said the man mockingly. Beverly looked at him appealingly, utterly without words to reply. The tears were welling to her eyes, and her heart was throbbing like that of a captured bird. In after life she was able to picture in her mind's eye all the details of that tableau in the mountain pass—the hopeless coach, the steaming horses, the rakish bandit and his picturesque men, the towering crags and a mile of a girl facing the end of everything.

"Your highness is said to be brave, but even your wonderful courage can-



"Oh, you won't kill us?" said the leader pleasantly. "Your escort has fled as though pursued by something stronger than shadows; your driver has deserted; your horses are half dead; you are indeed, as you have said, powerless. And you are, besides all these, in the clutches of a band of merciless cutthroats." (To be continued.)

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