Beverly of Graustark

By GEORGE BARR M'CUTCHEON, Author of "Graustark"

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(Continued from last week.)

CHAPTER XVII.

SHE was torn by conflicting emotions. That the two friends had surreptitiously exchanged messages, doubtless by an arrangement perfected since he had entered the service—possibly within the week—could not be disputed. When and how had they planned the accidental meeting? What had been their method of communication? And, above all, what were the contents of the messages exchanged? Were they of a purely personal nature or did they comprehend injury to the principality of Graustark? Beverly could not, in her heart, feel that Baldos was doing anything inimical to the country he served, and yet her duty and loyalty to Yetive made it imperative that the transaction should be reported at once. A word to Quinnox and Ravone would be seized and searched for the mysterious paper. This, however, looked utterly unreasonable, for the vagabonds were armed and in force, while Yetive was accompanied by but three men who could be depended upon. Baldos, under the conditions, was not to be reckoned upon for support. On the other hand, if he meant no harm, it would be cruel, even fatal, to expose him to this charge of duplicity. And while she turned these troublesome alternatives over in her mind the opportunity to act was lost. Ravone and his men were gone, and the harm, if any was intended, was done.

From time to time she glanced back at the guard. His face was imperturbable, even sphinx-like in its steadiness. She decided to hold him personally to account. At the earliest available moment she would demand an explanation of his conduct, threatening him if necessary. If he proved obdurate there was but one course left open to her. She would deliver him up to the justice he had outraged. Hour after hour went by, and Beverly suffered more than she could have told. The damage was done, and the chance to undo it was slipping farther and farther out of her grasp. She began to look upon herself as the vilest of traitors. There was no silver among the clouds that marred her thoughts that afternoon.

It was late in the day when the party returned to the castle tired out. Beverly was the only one who had no longing to seek repose after the fatiguing trip. Her mind was full of unrest. It was necessary to question Baldos at once. There could be no peace for her until she learned the truth from him. The strain became so great that at last she sent word for him to attend her in the park. He was to accompany the men who carried the sedan chair, in which she had learned to sit with a delightful feeling of being in the eighteenth century.

In a far corner of the grounds, now gray in the early dusk, Beverly bade the bearers to set down her chair and leave her in quiet for a few minutes. The two men withdrew to a respectful distance, whereupon she called Baldos to her side. Her face was flushed with anxiety.

"You must tell me the truth about that transaction with Ravone," she said, coming straight to the point.

"I was expecting this, your highness," said he quietly. The shadows of night were falling, but she could distinguish the look of anxiety in his dark eyes.

"Well?" she insisted impatiently.

"You saw the notes exchanged?"

"Yes, yes, and I command you to tell me what they contained. It was the most daring thing I"—

"Your highness, I cannot tell you what passed between us. It would be treacherous," he said firmly. Beverly gasped in sheer amazement.

"Treacherous? Good heaven, sir! To whom do you owe allegiance—to me or to Ravone and that band of tramps?" she cried, with eyes afire.

"To both, your highness," he answered so coldly that she was for the moment shocked. "I am loyal to you—loyal to the heart's core—and yet I am loyal to that unhappy band of tramps, as you choose to call them. They are my friends. You are only my sovereign."

"And you won't tell me what passed between you?" she said, angered by this epigrammatic remark.

"I cannot and be true to myself."

"Oh, you are a glorious soldier!" she exclaimed, with fierce sarcasm in her voice. "You speak of being true! I surprise you in the very act of"—

"Stay, your highness!" he said coldly. "You are about to call me a spy and a traitor. Spare me. I implore you, that humiliation. I have sworn to serve you faithfully and loyally. I have not deceived you, and I shall not. Paul Baldos has struggled to make an honest man. What passed between Ravone and myself concerns no one. It had nothing to do with the affairs of Graustark."

"Of course you would say that. You wouldn't tell me the truth," cried she hotly. "I am a fool! I have proved myself a fool in a thousand ways. I have no one to blame for exposing poor Graustark to danger. Oh, why didn't I cry out this afternoon!"

"I knew you would not," he said, with cool unconcern.

"Insolence! What do you mean by that?" she cried in confusion.

"In your heart you knew I was doing no wrong. You shielded me then, as you have shielded me from the beginning."

"I don't see why I sit here and let you talk to me like that," she said, feeling the symptoms of collapse. "You have not been fair with me, Baldos. You are laughing at me now and calling me a witless little fool. You—you did something today that shakes my faith to the very bottom. I never can trust you again. Good heaven, I hate to confess to—to every one that you are not honest."

"Your highness!" he implored, coming close to the chair and bending over her. "Before God I am honest with you. Believe me when I say that I have done nothing to injure Graustark. I cannot tell you what it was that passed between Ravone and me, but I swear on my soul that I have not been disloyal to my oath. Won't you trust me? Won't you believe?" His breath was fanning her ear, his voice was eager. She could feel the intensity of his eyes.

"Oh, I don't—don't know what to say to you," she murmured. "I have been so wrought up with fear and disappointment. You'll admit that it was very suspicious, won't you?" she cried, almost pleadingly.

"Yes, yes," he answered. His hand touched her arm, perhaps unconsciously. She threw back her head to give him a look of rebuke. Their eyes met, and after a moment both were full of pleading. Her lips parted, but the words would not come. She was afterward more than thankful for this, because his eyes impelled her to give voice to amazing things that suddenly rushed to her head.

"I want to believe you," she whispered softly.

"You must—you do! I would give you my life. You have it now. It is in your keeping and with it my honor. Trust me, I beseech you. I have trusted you."

"I brought you here"— she began, defending him involuntarily. "But, Baldos, you forget that I am the princess!" She drew away in sudden shyness, her cheeks rosy once more, her eyes filling with the most distressingly unreasonable tears. He did not move for what seemed hours to her. She heard the sharp catch of his breath and felt the repression that was mastering some unwelcome emotion in him.

Lights were springing into existence in all parts of the park. Beverly saw the solitary window in the monastery far away, and her eyes fastened on it as if for sustenance in this crisis of her life—this moment of surprise, this moment when she felt him laying hands upon the heart she had not suspected of treason. Twilight was upon them; the sun had set, and night was rushing up to lend unfair advantage to the forces against which they were struggling. The orchestra in the castle was playing something soft and tender—oh, so far away!

"I forget that I am a slave, your highness," he said at last, and his voice thrilled her through and through. She turned quickly and to her utter dismay found his face and eyes still close to hers, glowing in the darkness.

"Those men over there," she whispered helplessly—"they are looking at you."

"Now I thank God eternally," he cried softly. "You do not punish me; you do not rebuke me. God, there is no night!"

"You—you must not talk like that," she cried, pulling herself together suddenly. "I cannot permit it, Baldos. You forget who you are, sir."

"Ah, yes, your highness," he said before he stood erect. "I forget that I was a successful traitor. Now I am guilty of lese majesty." Beverly felt herself grow hot with confusion.

"What am I to do with you?" she cried in perplexity, her heart beating shamefully. "You swear you are honest, and yet you won't tell me the truth. Now, don't stand like that! You are as straight as a ramrod, and I know your dignity is terribly offended. I may be fool enough to believe you. I intend no harm to Graustark. You cannot be a traitor."

"I will some day give my life to repay you for those words, your highness," he said. His hand was resting on the back of the chair. Something warm touched it, and then it was lifted sudden