

TRUXTON KING

A Story of
Graustark
By GEORGE BARR
M'OUTCHEON

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CHAPTER VI. INGOMEDA THE BEAUTIFUL.

A LIGHT, chilling drizzle had been falling all evening, pattering softly upon the roof of leaves that covered the sidewalks along Castle avenue.

Almost in the center of the imposing line of palatial residences stood the home of the Duke of Perse, minister of finance, flanked on either side by structures as grim and as gay as itself, yet far less significant in their generation. Here dwelt the most important man in the principality, not excepting the devoted prime minister himself. Not that Perse was so well beloved, but that he held the destinies of the land in Midas-like fingers. More than that, he was the father of the famous Countess Marlaux, the most glorious beauty at the Austrian and Russian courts. She had gone forth from Graustark as its most notable bride since the wedding day of the Princess Yette, late in the nineties. Ingomeda, the beautiful, had journeyed far to the hymeneal altar. The husband who claimed her was a hated, dishonored man in his own land. There were those who went so far as to say that her father had delivered her into the hands of a latter day Bluebeard, who whisked her off into the high lands, many leagues from Vienna.

She was seen no more in the gay courts for a year. Then of a sudden she appeared before them all, as dazzlingly beautiful as ever, but with a haunting, wistful look in her dark eyes that could not be mistaken. The old count found an uneasy delight in exhibiting her to the world once more, plainly as a bit of property that all men were expected to look upon with envy in their hearts.

Then the Duke of Perse resumed his residence in Edelweiss, opening the old palace once more to the world. His daughter after the death of the princess began her extended visits to the home of her girlhood. So long as the princess was alive she remained away from Edelweiss, reluctant to meet the friend who had banished her husband long before the wedding day in Budapest. Now she came frequently and stayed for weeks at a time, apparently happy during these escapes from life in the great capitals.

Of late she came more frequently to Edelweiss than before. John Tullis was always to remember the moment when he looked upon this exquisite creature for the first time. That was months ago. After that he never ceased being a secret, silent worshiper at her transient shrine.

Ten o'clock on this rainy night a carriage had drawn up before the lower gates to the Perse grounds, and a tall, shadowy figure leaves it to hurry through the shrub lined walks to the massive doors.

Tullis had long since ceased to be a welcome visitor in the home of the Duke of Perse. The men were openly unfriendly to each other. The duke resented the cool interference of the sandy haired American; on the other hand, Tullis made no effort to conceal his dislike, if not distrust, of the older man.

The countess was alone in the long, warm tinted library.

"It is good of you to come," she said as they shook hands warmly. "Do you know it is almost a year since you last came to this house?"

"It would be a century, countess, if I were not welcomed in other houses where I am sure of a glimpse of you from time to time and a word now and then."

They both seated themselves before a glowing open fire.

"The duke has gone to Ganlook to play bridge with friends," she said at once. "He will not return till late. I have just telephoned to make sure." Her smile did more than to reassure him.

"Of course you will understand how impossible it is for us to come here, countess. Your father, the duke, does not unkindly matters, and I'm not quite a fool."

"It is of the prince that I want to speak, Mr. Tullis," she said. "I do want to talk very seriously with you concerning his future—I might say his immediate future."

He looked at her narrowly.

"Are you quite serious?"

"Quite. I could not have asked you to come to this house for anything trivial. You and I have become very good friends, you and I. Too good, perhaps, for I've no doubt there are old tabbies in Edelweiss who are provoked to criticism. You know what I mean."

"The prince is a sturdy little beggar," he began, but she lifted her hand in protest.

the ash from her cigarette into the receiver as she spoke slowly, intensely. "I think he is in peril—in deadly peril."

He stared hard. "What do you mean?" he demanded, with an involuntary glance over his shoulder. She interpreted that glance correctly.

"The peril is not here, Mr. Tullis. I know what you are thinking. My father is a loyal subject. The peril I suggest never comes to Graustark."

"Never comes to Graustark?" he asked, in a low, hoarse whisper.

"You don't—you can't mean your husband?"

"I mean Count Marlaux," she said steadily.

"He means evil to Prince Robin? Good heavens, countess, I—I can't believe it. I know he is bitter, revengeful and all that, but—"

"He is all that and more," she said. "First you must let me impress you with the fact that I am not a traitor to his cause. I could not be that, for the sufficient reason that I only suspect its existence. I am not in any sense a part of it. I do not know anything. I only feel. I dare say you realize that I do not love Count Marlaux—that there is absolutely nothing in common between us except a name. We won't go into that."

"I am overjoyed to hear you say this, countess," he said very seriously. "I have been so bold on occasion as to assert—for your private ear, of course—that you could not be any freak of nature happen to care for Count Marlaux, whom I know only by description. You have laughed at my so-called American wit, and you have been most tolerant. Now, I feel that I am justified. I'm immeasurably glad to hear you confess that you do not love your husband."

"You have never tried to make love to me," she went on. "That's what I like about you. I think most men are silly, not because I am so very young, but because my husband is so ridiculously old. Don't you think so? But, never mind; I see you are quite eager to answer. That's enough. Take another cigarette and—listen to what I am going to say." He declined the cigarette with a shake of his head.

After a moment she went on resolutely: "As I said before, I do not know that my suspicions are correct. I have not even breathed them to my father. He would have laughed at me. My husband is a Graustarkian, even as I am, but there is this distinction between us—he despises Graustark, while I love her in every drop of my blood. I know that in his heart he has never ceased to brew evil for the throne that disgraced him. He openly expresses his hatred for the present dynasty and has more than once said in public gatherings that he could cheerfully assist in its utter destruction. That, of course, is commonly known in Graustark, where he is scorned and derided. But he is not a man to serve his hatred with mere idle words and inaction."

"I am seeing you here in this big room openly," she went on, "for the simple reason that if I am being watched this manner of meeting may be above suspicion. We may speak freely here, for we cannot be heard unless we raise our voices. Don't be surprised or consternated. The eyes of the wall may be better than its ears."

"You don't mean to say you are being watched here in your father's house?" he demanded.

"I don't know. This I do know—the count has many spies in Edelweiss. He is systematically apprised of everything that occurs at court, in the city or in the council chamber. Day before yesterday I saw his secretary in the streets, a man who has been in his employ for five years or more and who now pretends to be a lawyer here. His name is Brutus. I spoke with him. He said that he had left the count six weeks ago in Vienna, determined to set out for himself in his chosen profession. He knows, of course, that I am not and never have been in the confidences of my husband. I asked him if he was known in Edelweiss that he had served the count as secretary. He promptly handed me one of his business cards on which he refers to himself as the former trusted and confidential secretary of Count Marlaux. Now, I happen to know that he is still in my husband's service, or was no longer ago than last week. He is here for a purpose, as my husband's representative. I have not been asleep all these months at Schloss Marlaux. I have seen and heard enough to convince me that some great movement is on foot. My intelligence tells me that it has to do with Graustark. As he wishes the prince no good, it must be for evil."

"But there is nothing he can do. He has no following here. The prince is adored by the people. Count Marlaux would not be such a fool as to—"

"He is no fool," she interrupted quickly. "That's why I am afraid. If he is plotting against the crown, you may depend upon it he is laying his plans well. John Tullis, that man is a devil—a devil incarnate!" She turned her face away. A spasm of utter repugnance crossed her face.

"I am afraid of Peter Brutus. He is here to watch—everybody."

She leaned against the great carved mantle post, a tall, slender, lissom creature, exquisitely gowned in rarest Irish lace, her bare neck and shoulders gleaming white against the dull tumbled beyond the faint glow from the embers creeping up to her face with the insistence of a maiden's blush. He gazed in rapt admiration, his heart thumping like fury in his great breast. She was little more than a girl, this wife of old Marlaux, and yet how

wise, how clever, how brilliant she was!

She was well named Ingomeda the Beautiful.

"Does Baron Dangloss know this man Brutus?" asked Tullis, arising to stand beside her.

"I don't know," she said thoughtfully. "I have not spoken to him concerning Brutus. Perhaps he knows. The baron is very wise. Let me tell you how I happen to know that Peter Brutus is still serving Count Marlaux and why I think his presence signifies a crisis of some sort."

Her voice, always low and even, seemed lower still. "In the first place, I have a faithful friend in one of the oldest retainers at Schloss Marlaux. His daughter is my maid. She is here with me now. The old man came to see Joseph a one day last week. He had accompanied Count Marlaux to the town of Balak, which is in Axphain, a mile beyond the Graustark line. Peter Brutus was with my husband in Balak for two days. They were closeted together from morning till night in the house where Marlaux was stopping. At the end of two days Brutus went away, but he carried with him a vast sum of money provided by my husband. It was given out that he was on his way to Serros, in Dawsbergen, where he expected to purchase a business block for his master. Marlaux waited another day in Balak, permitting Joseph's father to come on to Edelweiss with a message for me and to see his daughter. He—"

"And Joseph's father saw Brutus in Edelweiss?"

"No. But he did see him going into Balak as he left for Edelweiss that morning. He wore a disguise, but Jacob says he could not be mistaken. Moreover, he was accompanied by several men whom he recognized as Graustark mountaineers and hunters of rather unsavory reputation. They left Brutus at the gates of Balak and went off into the hills. All this happened before I knew that Peter was living in Edelweiss. When I saw him here I knew at once that his presence meant something sinister. I can put many things together that once puzzled me—the comings and goings of months, the queer looking men who came to the castle, the long absences of my husband and my—my own virtual imprisonment—yes, imprisonment. I was not permitted to leave the castle for days at a time during his absences."

"Surely you will not go back again!" he began hotly.

"Oh!" She put a finger to her lips. A manservant was quietly crossing the hall just off the library. "He is a new man. I do not like his appearance."

The servant disappeared through a door at the end of the hall.

"Then there were the great sums of money that my husband sent off from time to time," she continued, "and the strange boxes that came overland to the castle and later went away again as secretly as they came. Mr. Tullis, I am confident in my mind that those boxes contained firearms and ammunition. I have thought it all out. Perhaps I am wrong, but it seems to me that I can almost see those firearms stored away in the caves and cabins outside of Edelweiss, ready for instant use when the signal comes."

"God! An uprising! A plot so huge as that!" he gasped, amazed. It is fortunate that he was not facing the door. The same servant, passing once more, might have seen the telltale consternation in his eyes. "It cannot be possible! Why, Dangloss and his men would have scented it long ago."

"I have not said that I am sure of anything, remember that. I leave it to you to analyze. You have the foundation on which to work. I'd advise you to waste no time. Something tells me that the crisis is near at hand."

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"(To Be Continued.)
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All parties having my property listed are hereby notified to cancel same from your list.
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BENNETT—In Medford, Tuesday, March 15, 1910, to the wife of Louis Bennett, a daughter.

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Learn to waltz in six lessons, \$1 per lesson, six for \$5. Private lessons by appointment.
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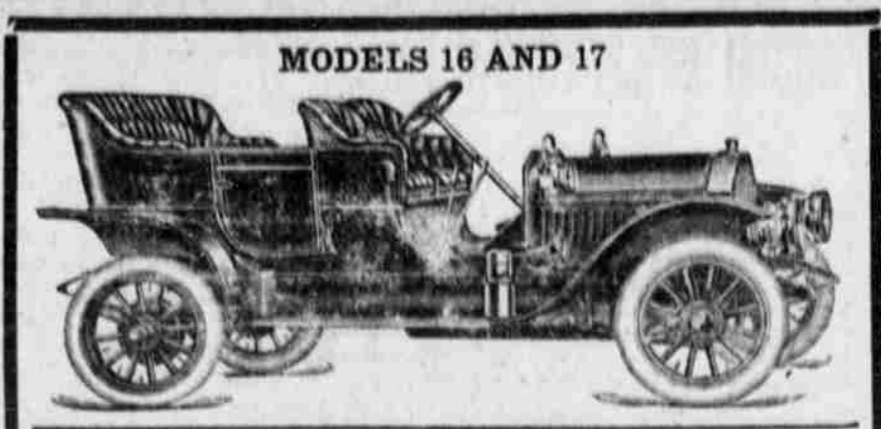
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