

# TRUXTON KING

A Story of ...Graumark

By GEORGE BARR M'GUTCHEON

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## CHAPTER VII. AT THE WITCH'S HUT.

IN the meantime our excellent young friend, Truxton King, was having a sorry time of it. It all began when he went to the cathedral in the hope of seeing the charming aunt of the little prince once more. Not only did he attend one service, but all of them, having been assured that the royal family worshipped there quite as regularly and as religiously as the lowliest communicant. She did not appear.

More than all this, he met with fresh disappointments when he ambled down to the armorer's shop. The doors were locked and there was no sign of life about the shuttered place.

The next day King made a purely business call at the shop of Mr. Spantz. He looked long, with a somewhat shifty eye, at the cabinet of ancient rings and necklaces, and then departed without having seen the interesting Miss Platunova.

At his room in the hotel he found a note addressed to himself. It did not have much to say, but it meant a great deal. There was no signature, and the handwriting was that of a woman.

"Please do not come again." That was all. He laughed with a fine tone of defiance and went back to the shop at 5 o'clock, just to prove that nothing so timid as a note could stop him. On the occasion of this last visit to the shop he did not stay long, but went away somewhat dazed to find himself the possessor of a ring he did not want and out of pocket just \$30, American.

Having come to the conclusion that knight errantry of that kind was not only profligate, but distinctly irritating to his sense of humor, he looked up Mr. Hobbs and arranged for a day's ride in the mountains.

Mr. Hobbs led his patron into the mountain roads early the next morning, both well mounted and provided with luncheon.

It is a good three hours' ride to the summit of Monastery mountain. And after the height has been attained one does not care to linger long among the chilly, whistling crags, with their snow crevasses and bitter winds. The utter loneliness, the stiffness of this frost crowned crest appalls, disheartens one who loves the fair, green things of life.

It was 3 o'clock when they clattered down a stone road and up to the forbidding vale in which lurked, like an evil, guilty thing, the log built home of the witch of Ganlook gap, that ancient female who made no secret of her practices in witchcraft.

A low thatched roof protruded from the hill against which the hut was built. As a matter of fact, a thin chimney grew out of the earth itself, for all the world like a smoking tree stump. The single door was so low that one was obliged to stoop to enter the little room where the dame had been holding forth for three score years, 'twas said. This was her throne room, her dining room, her bedchamber, her all. It would seem, unless one had been there before and knew that her kitchen was beyond, in the side of the hill. The one window, sans glass, looked narrowly out upon an odd opening in the foliage below, giving the occupant of the hut an unobstructed view of the winding road that led up from Edelweiss.

The two horsemen rode into the glen and came plump upon a small detachment of the royal guard, mounted and rather resolute in their lack of amiability.

"Soldiers, I'd say," remarked Mr. King. His eyes brightened and his hat came off with a switch.

"Hello! There's the prince!" Farther up the glen—in fact at the very door of the witch's hut—were gathered a small but rather distinguished portion of the royal household. It was not difficult to recognize the little prince. He was standing beside John Tullis, and it is not with a desire to speak ill of his valor that we add he was clutching the slackest part of that gentleman's riding breeks with an earnestness that betrayed extreme trepidation. Facing them, on the stone doorstep, was the witch herself. Behind Tullis and the prince were several ladies and gentlemen.

Truxton King's heart swelled suddenly. Next to the tall figure of Colonel Quinnox of the royal guard was the slim, entrancing lady of his most recent dreams, the prince's aunt, the lady of the goldfish conspiracy!

The Countess Marlanx, tall and exquisite, was a little apart from the others, with Baron Dangloss and young Count Vos Engo, whom Truxton was ready to hate because he was a recognized suitor for the hand of the slim young person in gray. He was for riding boldly up to this little group, but a very objectionable lieutenant barred the way, supported in no small measure by the agitated defection of Mr. Hobbs.

The way was made easy by the intervention of the alert young woman in gray. She caught sight of the restricted adventurers—or one of them. To be quite accurate—and after speeding a swift smile of astonishment, turned quickly to Prince Bobby.

The prince broke the ice. "Hello!" he cried shrilly. "Hello!" responded the gentleman readily. John Tullis found himself being dragged away from the witch's door toward the newcomer at the bottom of the glen. Mr. Hobbs listened with deepening awe to the friendly conversation which resulted in Truxton King going forward to join the party in front of the hut.

Truxton was duly presented to the ladies and gentlemen of the party by John Tullis, who gracefully announced that he knew King's parents in New York. Baron Dangloss was quite an old friend, if one were to judge by the manner in which he greeted the young man. The lady in gray smiled so sweetly and nodded so blithely that Tullis, instead of presenting King to her as he had done to the Countess Marlanx and others, merely said:

"And you know one another, of course." Whereupon she flushed very prettily.

Truxton King, scarcely able to believe his good fortune, crowded into the loathsome, squalid room with his aristocratic companions.

Never had Truxton looked upon a creature who so thoroughly vindicated the lifelong reliance he had put in the description of witches given by the fairy tale tellers of his earliest youth. She had the traditional hook nose and peaked chin, the glittering eyes, the thousand wrinkles and the toothless gums. He looked about for the raven and the cat, but if she had them they were not in evidence. At a rough guess he calculated her age at 100 years.

"Growsome lady, isn't she?" whispered King. "I shall dream of her for months," whispered the lady in gray, shuddering.

"Would you mind telling me how I am to address you?" whispered King. They were leaning against the mud plastered wall near the little window side by side. "You see, I'm a stranger in a strange land."

"You must not speak while she is gazing into the crystal," she warned after a quick, searching glance at his face.

Although it was broad daylight, the low, stuffy room would have been pitch dark had it not been for the flickering candles on the table beside the bent gray head of the mumbling fortune teller, whose bony fingers twitched over and about her crystal globe like wiggling serpents' tails. The window gave little or no light, and the door was closed, her grinning grandson leaning against it limply.

The witch began by reading the fortune of John Tullis, who had been pushed forward by the wide eyed prince. In a cackling monotone she rambled through a supposititious history of his past, for the chief part

so unintelligible that even he could not gainsay the statements. Later she bent her piercing eyes upon the prince and refused to read his future, shrilly asserting that she had not the courage to tell what might befall the little ruler, all the while muttering something about the two little princes who had died in a tower ages and ages ago. Seeing that the boy was frightened, Tullis withdrew him to the background. The Countess Marlanx came next. She was smiling derisively.

"You have returned from some one whom you hate," began the witch. "He is your husband. You will marry again. There is a fair haired man in love with you. You are in love with him. I can see trouble!"

But the countess deliberately turned away from the table, her cheeks flaming with the consciousness that a smile had swept the circle behind her graceful back.

"Ridiculous!" she said and avoided John Tullis' gaze. "I don't care to hear any more. Come, baron! You are next."

Truxton King, subdued and troubled in his mind, found himself studying his surroundings and the people who went so far to make them interesting. His eye had fallen upon a crack in the door that led to the kitchen, although he had no means of knowing that it was a kitchen. To his amazement, a gleaming eye was looking out upon the room from beyond this narrow crack. He looked long and found that he was not mistaken. There was an eye glued close to the opposite side of the rickety door, and its gaze was directed to the Countess Marlanx.

Without pausing to consider the result of his action, he sprang across the room, shouting as he did so that there was a man behind the door. Grasping

the latch, he threw the door wide open, the others in the room looking at him as if he were suddenly crazed.

There was instant commotion, with cries and exclamations from all. Quick as the others were, the old woman was at his side before them, snarling with rage. Her talonlike fingers sunk into his arm, and her gaze went darting about the room in a most convincing way.

Baron Dangloss was convinced that the young man had seen the eye. Without commotion he began a search of the room, the old woman looking on with a grin of glee.

"Search! Search!" she croaked. "It was the spirit eye! It is looking at you now, my dear baron! It finds you, you cannot be found. No, no! Oh, you fool! Get out! Get out! All of you! Get out or the prince, I fear you may all your heads. This is my home, my castle! Get out!"

"There was a man here, old woman," said the baron coolly. "Where is the man?"

"She laughed aloud, a horrid sound. The prince clasped Tullis by the lee in terror.

"There is no window, no trapdoor, no slught," remarked the baron, puzzled. "Nothing but the stovepipe, six inches in diameter. A man couldn't crawl out through that, I'm sure. Mr. King, we've come upon a real mystery—the eye without a visible body!"

So early the old woman stepped into the middle of the room and began to wave her hands in a mysterious manner over an empty pot that stood on the floor in front of the stove. Then before their startled eyes a thin film of smoke began to rise from the empty pot. It grew in volume until the room was quite dense with it. Even more quickly than it began it disappeared, drawn apparently by some supernatural agency into the draft of the stove and out through the rickety chimney pipe.

A deafening crash as of many guns came to their ears from the outside. With one accord the entire party rushed to the outer door, a wild laugh from the hag pursuing them.

"There!" she screamed. "There goes all there was of him! And so shall we all go some day. Fire and smoke!"

Just outside the door stood Lieutenant Saffo of the guard.

"Good Lord!" shouted Tullis. "What is the matter? What has happened?"

"The storm, sir," said Saffo. "It is coming down the valley like the wind. A great crash of thunder burst overhead, and lightning darted through the black, swirling skies."

(To Be Continued.)

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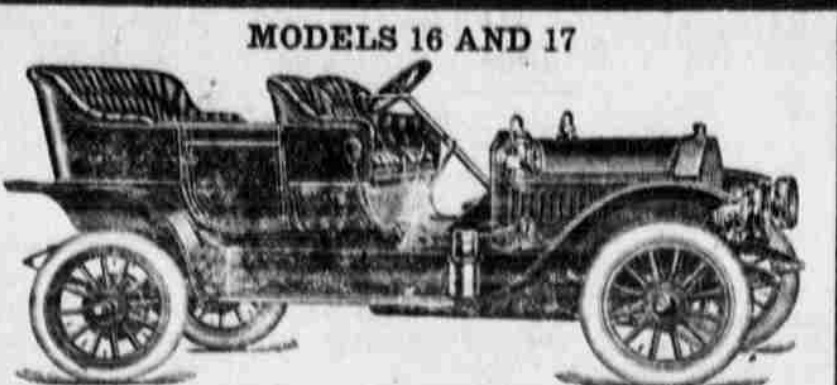
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