

TRUXTON KING

A Story of
...Graustark
By GEORGE BARR
M'GUTCHEON

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CHAPTER VIII.
LOOKING FOR AN EYE.

THE witch was haranguing her huddled audience, cursing the soldiers, laughing gleefully in the faces of her stately, scornful guests, greatly to the irritation of Baron Dangloss, toward whom she showed an especial attention.

Tullis was holding the prince in his arms. Colonel Quinnox stood before them, keeping the babbling, leering beldame from thrusting her face close to that of the terrified boy. The Countess Marlanx, pale and rigid, her wondrous eyes glowing with excitement, stood behind John Tullis.

With incredible swiftness the storm passed. Almost at its height there came a cessation of the roaring tempest, the downpour was checked, the thunder died away and the lightning trickled off into faint flashes. The sky cleared as if by magic. The exhibition, if you please, was over!

"It is the most amazing thing I've ever seen," Dangloss said over and over again.

The Countess Marlanx was trembling violently. Tullis, observing this, tried to laugh away her nervousness.

"Here coincidence: that's all," he said. "You can't believe she brought about this storm?"

"It isn't that," she said in a low voice. "I feel as if a grave personal danger had just passed me by. Not danger for the rest of you, but for me alone. That is the sensation I have—the feeling of one who has stepped back from the brink of an abyss just in time to avoid being pushed over. I can't make you understand. See! I am trembling."

"Nerves, my dear countess—shadows! You'll be over it as soon as we are outside."

Ten minutes later the cavalcade started down the rain swept road toward the city, dry blankets having been placed across the saddles occupied by the ladies and the prince. The witch stood in her doorway, laughing gleefully, inviting them to come often.

"Come again, your highness!" she croaked sarcastically.

"The next time I come it will be with a torch to burn you alive!" shouted back Dangloss. To Tullis he added: "Gad, sir, they did well to burn witches in your town of Salem. You cleared the country of them—the pests!"

Down through the lowering shades rode the prince's party swiftly, even gayly by virtue of relaxation from the strain of a weird half hour. No one revealed the slightest sign of apprehension arising from the mysterious demonstration in which nature had taken a hand.

Truxton King, for reasons best known to himself, soon relapsed into a thoughtful, contemplative silence. Between us, he was sorely vexed and disappointed. When the gallant start was made from the glen of "dead men's bones" he found that he was to cast astern aside, quite completely ignored by the fair Loraine. She rode off with

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young Count Von Ego without so much as a friendly wave of the hand to him.

Von Ego, being an officer in the royal guard, rode ahead by order of Colonel Quinnox. Truxton, therefore, had her back in view—at rather a vexing distance, too—for mile after mile of the ride to the city.

He galloped along beside the baron, a prey to gloomy considerations. What was the use? He had no chance to win her. That was for story books and plays. She belonged to another world far above his.

The baron's dry, insinuating voice broke in upon the young man's thoughts. "I think it's pretty well understood that she's going to marry him." The little old minister had been reading King's thoughts; he had the satisfaction of seeing his victim start guiltily. King managed to control himself, asking with bland interest:

"Indeed! Is it a good match, baron? The baron smiled. "I think so. He has been a trifle wild, but I believe he has settled down. Splendid family. He is desperately in love."

"I hadn't thought much about it. Is she in love with him?"

"She sees a great deal of him," was the diplomatic answer.

"Would you mind telling me just who she is, baron?"

Dangloss was truly startled. "Do you mean, sir, that you don't know her?" he asked, almost harshly. "I don't know her name."

"And you had the effrontery to— My excellent friend, you amaze me! I know that Americans are bold; but, by gad, sir, I've always looked upon them as gentlemen. You—"

"Hold on, Baron Dangloss!" interrupted Truxton, very red in the face. "You'd better hear my side of the story first. She went to school with my sister. She knows me, but refused to tell me who she is."

"Well, my boy, if she elects to keep you in the dark concerning her name, it is not for me to betray her. Ladies in her position, I dare say, enjoy these little mysteries."

"It was dusk when they entered the northern gates. Above the castle King said goodby to Tullis and the countess, gravely saluted the sleepy prince and followed Mr. Hobbs off to the heart of the city. He was hot with resentment. Either she had forgotten to say good-

bye to him or had willfully decided to ignore him altogether. At any rate, she entered the gates to the castle grounds without so much as an indifferent glance in his direction.

Truxton knew in advance that he was to have a sleepless, unhappy night. In his room at the hotel he found the second anonymous letter, unquestionably from the same source, but this time printed in crude, stilted letters. It had been stuck under the door.

"Leave the city at once. You are in great danger. Save yourself."

This time he did not laugh. That it was from Olga Platanova he had no doubt. But why she should interest herself so persistently in his welfare was quite beyond him. And what, after all, could she mean by "great danger—save yourself!"

He indulged in a long spell of thoughtfulness. "No, by George, I'll not turn tail at the first sign of danger. I'll stay here and assist Dangloss in unraveling this matter. And I'll go up to that witch's hole before I'm a day older to have it out with her. I'll find out where the smoke came from, and I'll know where that eye went to." He sighed without knowing it.

"By Jove, I'd like to do something to show her I'm not the blooming duffer she thinks I am."

He could not find Baron Dangloss that night nor early the next day. Hobbs, after being stigmatized as the only British coward in the world, changed his mind and made ready to accompany King to the hovel in Ganlook gap.

By noon the streets in the vicinity of the plaza were filled with strange, rough looking men, undeniably laborers.

"Who are they?" demanded King. "There's a strike on among the men building the railroad," said Hobbs.

"They'd better look out for these fellows," said King, very soberly. "I don't like the appearance of 'em. They look like cutthroats."

"Take my word for it, sir, they are. They're the riffraff of all Europe."

"I hope Baron Dangloss knows how to handle them?" in some anxiety. "In due time they rode into the somber solitudes of Ganlook gap and up to the witch's glen. Here Mr. Hobbs balked. He refused to adventure farther than the mouth of the stony ravine. Truxton approached the hovel alone, without the slightest trepidation. The goose herd grandson was driving a flock of geese across the green bowl below the cabin. The American called out to him, and a moment later the youth, considerably excited, drove his geese up to the door. While they were vainly haranguing each other the old woman appeared. Uttering shrill exclamations, she hurried down to confront King with blazing eyes. Her horrid grin of derision brought a flush to his cheek.

"I'll lay you a hundred gavvos that the kettle and smoke experiment is a fake of the worst sort," he announced. "Have it your own way—have it your own way!" she cackled.

"Tell you what I'll do—if I can't expose that trick in ten minutes I'll make you a present of a hundred gavvos."

She took him up like a flash, a fact which startled and disconcerted him not a little. Her very eagerness augured ill for his proposition.



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The staring, burning eye was looking straight at him from the jagged crack in the door.

"I'll get you this time!" he shouted, crossing the room in two eager leaps. The door in his violent clutch swung open with a bang.

The owner of that mocking, phantom eye was gone!

Like a frantic dog, Truxton dashed about the little kitchen, looking in every corner, every crack, for signs of the thing he chased. The old woman was standing in the middle of the outer room, grinning at him with genuine malevolence.

"Ha, ha!" she croaked. "You fool! You fool! Search! Search! Smell him out! All the good it will do you! Ha, ha!"

"By gad, I will get at the bottom of this!" shouted Truxton, stubborn rage possessing him. "There's some one here, and I know it. I'm not such a fool as to believe— Say! What's that?"

The ceiling! By the eternal, that scraping noise explains it! There's where the secret trap door is—in the ceiling. Within arm's reach, at that! Wait a moment, old woman!

The hag was standing in the kitchen door now, still grinning evilly. She watched the eager young man pounce upon the low ceiling with a three-legged stool that he had seized from the floor.

He was pounding vigorously on the roughly bearded ceiling when the sharp voice of the old woman, raised in command, caused him to lower the stool and turn upon her with gleaming, triumphant eyes. The look he saw in her face was sufficient to check his enterprise for the moment. He dropped the stool and started toward her, his arms extended to catch her swaying form. The look of the dying was in her eyes. She seemed to be crumpling before him.

He reached her in time, his strong arms grasping the frail, bent figure as it sank to the floor. As he lifted her bodily from her feet, intent upon carrying her to the open air, her bony fingers sank into his arm with the grip of death, and—could he believe his ears!—a low, mocking laugh came from her lips.

Down where the pebbly house yard merged into the mossy banks Mr. Hobbs sat tight, still staring with gloomy eyes at the dark little hut up the glen. A quarter of an hour had passed since King disappeared through the doorway. Mr. Hobbs was getting nervous.

The shiftless, lanky goose herd came forth in time and lazily drove his scattered flock off into the lower glen.

Presently Hobbs caught sight of a thin stream of smoke, rather black than blue, arising from the little chimney at the rear of the cabin. His eyes

few very wide open; his heart experienced a sudden throbbing moment; his mind leaped backward to the unexplained smoke mystery of the day before. It was on the end of his tongue to cry out to his unseen patron, to urge him to leave the witch to her devilry and come along home, when the old woman herself appeared in the doorway—alone.

She sat down upon the doorstep, puffing away at a long pipe, her hooded face almost invisible from the distance which he resolutely held. She was no more than a black, inanimate heap of rags piled against the door jamb.

Hobbs let out a shout. The old woman arose and hobbled toward him, leaning upon a great cane.

"Where's the Mr. King?" called out Hobbs.

Her arm was raised, a bony finger pointing to the treetops above her hovel.

"He's gone. Didn't you see him? He went off among the treetops. You won't see him again," she waited a moment and then went on in most ingratiating tones: "Would you care to come into my house? I can show you the road he took. You?"

But Mr. Hobbs, his hair on end, had dropped the rein of King's horse and was putting head to his own head, whirling frantically into the path that led away from the hated, damned spot. Down the road he crashed, pursued by witches whose persistence put to shame the efforts of those famed ladies of Tam o' Shanter in the long ago. If he had looked over his shoulder he might have discovered that he was followed by a riderless horse, nothing more. But a riderless horse is a grewsome thing sometimes.

(To Be Continued.)

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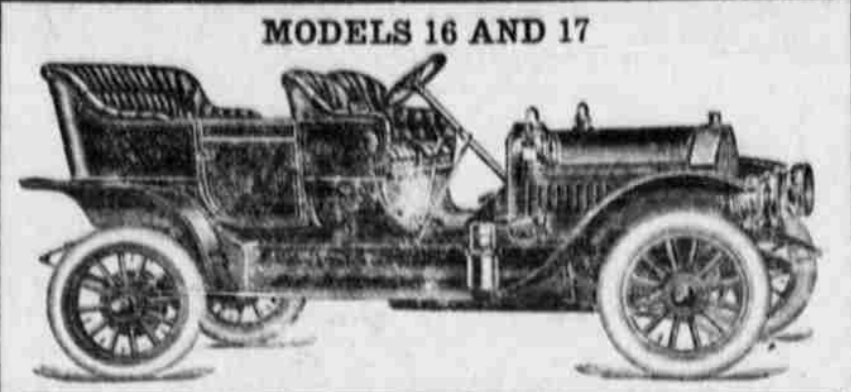
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