

TRUXTON KING

A Story of
...Graumark

By GEORGE BARR
M'GUTCHEON

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CHAPTER X.
THE IRON COUNT.

WHEN King, in the kindness of his heart, grasped the old woman to keep her from falling to the floor he played directly into the hands of very material agencies under her control. The next instant something struck him in the face. Then with a fierce jerk this same object tightened about his neck.

A noose had been dropped over his head. As he was pulled backward his startled, bulging eyes swept the ceiling. Above him a square opening had appeared in the ceiling. Two ugly, bearded faces were leaning over the edge, and strong hands were grasping a thick rope. He was straining. Frantically he grasped the rope, lifting himself from the floor in the effort to loosen the noose with his free hand. A hoarse laugh broke upon his dining ears, the leaning faces drew nearer, and then as everything went black a heavy yet merciful blow fell upon his head.

Not many minutes passed before consciousness, which had been but partially lost, returned to him. It was pitch dark, and the air was hot and close. Not a sound came to his throbbing ears. With characteristic irresponsibility he began to swear softly, but articulately. A gruff voice, startlingly near at hand, interrupted him. "Spit it out, young fellow! Swear like a man, not like a blamed canary bird."

The hidden speaker was unquestionably an American.

"Where am I?" demanded the captive.

"You're here, that's where you are," was the sarcastic answer.

"Are you an American?"

"No; I am a Chinaman. I was born in Newport—as an afterthought—Kentucky."

"This is the worst high handed outrage I've ever—"

"Better save your breath, young fellow. You won't have it very long, so save what you can of it."

"You mean I am to stop breathing altogether?" asked the prisoner.

"Something like that."

"Why?"

"You'll find out when the boss gets good and ready. You wanted to get a poke at the old man's eye, did you? By thunder, that's like an American—never satisfied to let things alone. See what it got you into?"

"The old man's eye? What old man?"

"That's for you to find out, if you can. You've made a poor start at it."

"How do you, an American, happen to be mixed up in a deal like this?"

"It's healthier work than making barrels at—I was going to say Sing Sing, but I hear they've changed the name. I prefer outdoor work."

"Fugitive, eh?"

"You might call it that. I'm wanted in seven states. The demand for me is great."

That he had fallen into the hands of a band of conspirators was quite clear to King. Whether they were brigands or more important operators against the crown he was of course in no position to decide. Time would tell.

It was enough that they expected to kill him sooner or later. This in itself was sufficient to convince him that he was not to be held for ransom, but to be disposed of for reasons best known to his captors.

Like a shot the warning of Olga Piatonova flashed into his brain. His guard had mentioned "the old man." Good heavens! Could he mean Spantz? The cold perspiration was standing on King's brow. Spantz! He recalled the wickedness in the armorer's face. But why should Spantz wish him evil?

The anarchists! The reds! Olga was an avowed anarchist. "By gad, they think I am a detective!" he exclaimed, light coming to him with a rush.

"What's that?" snapped the other. Truxton could almost feel the other's body grow tense despite the space between them. "Are you a detective? Are you? If you are, I'll finish you up right here. You?"

"Not! They're on the wrong scent. By Jove, the laugh's on old man Spantz."

"Oh! So you do know what's up, then? Spantz, eh? Well, what you've guessed at or found out won't make much difference, my fine young fellow."

The glimmer of a light came bobbing up from somewhere behind Truxton. He could see the flickering shadows on the wall. Two men crept into the room a moment later. One of them carried a lantern; the other turned King's body over with his foot. Truxton saw that the three ruffians were great, brutal faced fellows, with bare arms that denoted toil as well as spoils. The third man grasped the prisoner by the foot, swearing in a language of his own. The Yankee desperado took his shoulders, and together, with earnest grunts, they followed the man with the lantern. He could see that they were crowding through a low,

narrow passage, finally depositing him with scant courtesy upon the rocky floor of what proved to be a rather commodious cave.

Daylight streamed into this convenient "hole in the wall," lying upon his side, Truxton faced the opening that looked out upon the world. Near the opening stood the tall, gaunt figure of a man, thin shouldered and stooped. His back was to the captive, but King observed that the three men, with two companions, who sat at the back of the cave, never removed their gaze



"BETTER SAVE YOUR BREATH, YOUNG FELLOW. YOU WON'T HAVE IT LONG."

from the striking figure outlined against the sky.

The watcher turned slowly to take in the altered conditions behind him. King saw that he was old, gray haired and cadaverous. This, then, was the "old man," and he was not William Spantz.

"Your name is King, I believe," came from the thin lips of the old man.

"Yes. May I inquire?"

"No; you may not inquire. Put a gag in his mouth. I don't care to hear anything from him. Gag him and cut the rope from his feet. He may walk from now on."

Three men sprang to do his bidding. King felt in that instant that he was looking for the first time upon the features of the Iron Count, Marlanx the dishonored. He lay there helpless, speechless for many minutes, glancing at this cruel tyrant. It was enough that Marlanx suspected him of being in the way. To be suspected was to be condemned.

Marlanx was speaking. Truxton looked up, as at an executioner. The Iron Count sat upon a bowlder near his feet.

"We have met before. Perhaps you remember meeting my eye in Dame Ebba's cabin—twice, I think. You remember, I see. Ha, ha! You were very slow not to have caught such an old man. I dare say you are wondering what I intend to do with you, now that I have you. Well, I am not the man to mince words. Mr. King, you are quite young, but the good die young. I am very old, you observe. I will not say that you are to die tonight or tomorrow or any day, for I do not know. I am going to send you to a court. Not an ordinary court, Mr. King, but one of extreme perspicacity. I fancy you will die before long. We can spare you. I do not approve of meddlers. It seems to be quite settled that you are a police agent."

The steady, cruel eyes fascinated King. He knew that he was in desperate straits.

"I am glad you called again at my temporary abode. Mr. King, Americans are always welcome; the sooner they come, the sooner it's over. It may interest you to know that I am very partial to Americans. Were I a cannibal I could eat them in relish. If I had my way, all Americans should be in heaven. The earth surely is not good enough nor big enough for them, and hell is already overcrowded. Yes, I love the Americans dearly. I should enjoy a similar visit from Mr. John Tullis. I expect him to visit me in my humble castle before many days. I should like to have him remain there until his dying day."

King shuddered.

"Night is coming. I must say farewell, my bold young friend. My way lies to the north. This is merely a land of promise to me. You go southward, to the city of Edelweiss. But not through the gates; oh, no! There are other ways, as you will find. Goodby, my brave Sir Galahad. I may never see you again."

With a courtly bow he turned

and directed his final instructions to the guards. With a curt nod to the men, he strode out through the mouth of the cave and was gone. Dusk had settled down upon mountain and valley. One of the men cut the rope that bound Truxton's feet.

"Get up," said the Newport man. "We've got to be movin'."

Still gagged and somewhat dizzy, King was hurried off into the narrow mountain path, closely surrounded by the five men.

The silent, cautious march down the valley, through the gap and along the ridge carried them far into the night. This much he knew—they were in the hills directly above the northern gates. The vague, black shadow of a lightless house loomed up before them. In a twinkling he was hustled across the road and into a door, then down a flight of stairs, through pitchy darkness, guided by two of the men, a whispered word of advice now and then from the Yankee saving him from perilous stumbles. He was jerked up sharply with a command to stand still. A light flashed suddenly in his face, blinding him for a moment.

Soon he saw that they were in a broad, bare cellar; three men in heavy black bonds were in earnest conversation with several of his captors; a were postulating fiercely.

The Newport companion enlightened him by means of the pipe he was smoking with. "Here's where we say goodby, young fellow. We turn you over to these gent's, whoever they are. You go into the village gay with these swabs by the sewer line, I guess." Truxton picked up his ears.

"The old man has had a hole chipped in the sewer here, they tell me, and it's a snap to get into the city. Not very clean or neat, but it gets you there well, so long! They're ready. I see they don't monkey long when they've got a thing to do."

In another moment his guardians were transferred; he was being hurried across the cellar toward an open door way. Down a few stone steps he was pushed by the bearded crew, and then pushed through a hole in what appeared to be a heavy brick wall. He swayed at once where he was. The smell of running water came up to him. It was the great sewer that ran from the hills through the heart of the city, flushed continuously by a diverted mountain stream that swept down from above.

He did not know how long they traversed the chill sewer. In time, however, the water got deeper; rats began to scurry along the sides of the circle or to swim frantically on in front of the disturbers.

At last the strange journey ended. They came to a niche in the slimy wall. Up into this the men climbed. The man above was cautiously tapping on what appeared to be solid masonry. To King's surprise a section of the wall suddenly opened before them. He was seized from above by strong hands and literally jerked through the hole, up narrow steps and then into a long, dimly lighted room, in the center of which stood a long table.

He was passed on into a small room adjoining. Some one, speaking in English, told him to sit down. The gag was removed from his stiff, inflamed mouth.

"Fetch him some water," said a voice that he was sure he recognized—a high, querulous voice.

"Hello, Spantz!" articulated Truxton, turning to the black bearded, bent figure.

There was an instant of silence. Then Spantz spoke, with a soft laugh: "You will not know so much tomorrow, Herr King. Give him water, man. He cannot talk with a dry throat."

King was pushed out into the larger room, where he was confronted by a crowd of bewhiskered men and snaky eyed women with most intellectual nose glasses. It required but a glance to convince him that the whiskers were false.

For nearly an hour he was probed with questions concerning his business in Edelweiss. Threats followed close upon his unsatisfactory answers, though they were absolutely truthful.

"We'll find a way to make you talk tomorrow, my friend! Starving is not pleasant."

"You would not starve me!" he cried.

"No. You will have the pleasure of starving yourself," said a thin eyed fellow whom he afterward knew as Peter Brutus.

He was thrown back into the little room. To his surprise and gratification the bonds on his wrists were removed.

He found a match in his box and struck it. There was no article of furniture. The floor was bare, the walls green with age. A chimney hole in the ceiling was perhaps the only means by which fresh air could reach this dreary place. Sleep was claiming his senses. He made a pillow of his coat and stretched his weary bones upon the relentless floor.

"No one will ever know," he murmured, his last waking thought being of a dear one at home.

(To Be Continued.)

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