Beverly of Graustark

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

Copyright, 1904, by Dodd, Mead and Company

CHAPTER III.

A PONDEROUS coach lumbered slowly, almost painfully, along the narrow road that skirted the base of a mountain. It was drawn by four horses, and upon the seat sat two rough, unkempt Russians, one holding the reins, the other lying back in a lazy doze. The month was June, and all the world seemed soft and sweet and joyous. To the right flowed a turbulent mountain stream, boiling savagely with the alien waters of the flood season. Ahead of the creaking coach rode four horsemen, all heavily armed; another quartette followed some distance in the rear. At the side of the coach an officer of the Russian mounted police was riding easily, jangling his accouterments with a vigor that disheartened at least one occupant of the vehicle. The windows of the coach doors were lowered, permitting the fresh mountain air to caress fondly the face of the young woman who tried to find comfort in one of the broad seats. Since early morn she had struggled with the hardships of that seat, and the late afternoon found her very much out of patience. The opposite seat was the resting place of a substantial colored woman and a stupendous pile of bags and boxes. The boxes were continually toppling over, and the bags were forever getting under the feet of the once placid servant, whose face, quite luckily, was much too black to reflect the anger she was able otherwise, through years of practice, to conceal.

"How much farther have we to go, lieutenant?" asked the girl on the rear seat plaintively, even humbly. The man was very deliberate with his English. He had been recommended to her as the best linguist in the service at Radovitch, and he had a reputation to sustain.

"It another hour is but yet," he managed to inform her, with a confident smile.

"Oh, dear," she sighed, "a whole hour of this!"

"We soon be dar, Miss Beverly. Jes' yo' mak' up yo' min' to res' easy-like, an' we"— But the faithful old colored woman's advice was lost in the wrathful exclamation that accompanied another dislodgment of bags and boxes. The wheels of the coach had dropped suddenly into a deep rut. Aunt Fanny's growls were scarcely more potent than poor Miss Beverly's moans.

"It is getting worse and worse," exclaimed Aunt Fanny's mistress petulantly. "I'm black and blue from head to foot, aren't you, Aunt Fanny?"

"Ah cain' say as to de blue, Miss Bev'ly. Hit's a mos' monstrous bad road, sho 'nough. Stay up dar, will yo'?" she concluded, jamming a bag into an upper corner.

Miss Calhoun, tourist extraordinary again consulted the linguist in the saddle. She knew at the outset that the quest would be hopeless, but she could think of no better way to pass the next hour than to extract a mite of information from the officer.

"Now for a good old chat," she said beaming a smile upon the grizzled Russian. "Is there a decent hotel in the village?" she asked.

They were on the edge of the village before she succeeded in finding out all that she could, and it was not a great deal, either. She learned that the town of Balak was in Axphain, scarcely a mile from the Graustark line. There was an eating and sleeping house on the main street, and the population of the place did not exceed 300.

When Miss Beverly awoke the next morning, sore and distressed, she looked back upon the night with a horror that sleep had been kind enough to interrupt only at intervals. The wretched hostelry lived long in her secret catalogue of terrors. Her bed was not a bed; it was a torture. The room, the table, the—but it was all too odious for description. Fatigue was her only friend in that miserable hole. Aunt Fanny had slept on the floor near her mistress' cot, and it was the good old colored woman's grumbling that awoke Beverly. The sun was climbing up the mountains in the east, and there was an air of general activity about the place. Beverly's watch told her that it was past 8 o'clock.

"Good gracious!" she exclaimed. "It's nearly noon, Aunt Fanny. Hurry along here and get me up. We must leave this abominable place in ten minutes." She was up and racing about excitedly.

"Befo' breakfas'?" demanded Aunt Fanny weakly.

"Goodness, Aunt Fanny, is that all you think about?"

"Well, honey, yo'll be thinkin' mighty serious 'bout breakfas' 'long 'bouts 'leven o'clock. Dat li'l tummy o' yourn'll be pow'ful mad 'cause it didn' "—

"Very well, Aunt Fanny, you can run along and have the woman put up breakfast for us, and we'll eat it on the road. I positively refuse to eat another mouthful in that awful dining room. I'll be down in ten minutes."

She was down in less. Sleep, no matter how hard earned, had revived her spirits materially. She pronounced herself ready for anything. There was a wholesome disdain for the rigors of the coming ride through the mountains in the way she gave orders for the start. The Russian officer met her just outside the entrance to the inn. He was less English than ever, but he eventually gave her to understand that he had secured permission to escort her as far as Ganlook, a town in Graustark not more than fifteen miles from Edelweiss and at least two days from Balak. Two competent Axphainian guides had been retained, and the party was quite ready to start. He had been warned of the presence of brigands in the wild mountainous passes north of Ganlook. The Russians could go no farther than Ganlook because of a royal edict from Edelweiss forbidding the nearer approach of armed forces. At that town, however, he was sure she easily could obtain an escort of Graustarkian soldiers.

As the big coach crawled up the mountain road and farther into the oppressive solitudes Beverly Calhoun drew from the difficult lieutenant considerable information concerning the state of affairs in Graustark. She had been eagerly awaiting the time when something definite could be learned. Before leaving St. Petersburg early in the week she was assured that a state of war did not exist. The Princess Yetive had been in Edelweiss for six weeks. A formal demand was framed soon after her return from America requiring Dawsbergen to surrender the person of Prince Gabriel to the authorities of Graustark. To this demand there was no definite response, Dawsbergen insolently requesting time in which to consider the proposition.

Axphain immediately sent an envoy to Edelweiss to say that all friendly relations between the two governments would cease unless Graustark took vigorous steps to recapture the royal assassin. On one side of the unhappy principality a strong, overbearing princess was egging Graustark on to fight, while on the other side an equally aggressive people defied Yetive to come and take the fugitive if she could. The poor princess was between two ugly alternatives, and a struggle seemed inevitable. At Balak it was learned that Axphain had recently sent a final appeal to the government of Graustark, and it was no secret that something like a threat accompanied the message.

Prince Gabriel was in complete control at Serros and was disposed to laugh at the demands of his late captors. His half brother, the dethroned Prince Dantan, was still hiding in the fastnesses of the hills, protected by a small company of nobles, and there was no hope that he ever could regain his crown. Gabriel's power over the army was supreme. The general public admired Dantan, but it was helpless in the face of circumstances.

"But why should Axphain seek to harass Graustark at this time?" demanded Beverly Calhoun in perplexity and wrath. "I should think the brutes would try to help her."

"There is an element of opposition to the course the government is taking," the officer informed her in his own way, "but it is greatly in the minority. The Axphainians have hated Graustark since the last war, and the princess despises this American. It is an open fact that the Duke of Mizrox leads the opposition to Princess Volga, and she is sure to have him beheaded if the chance affords. He is friendly to Graustark and has been against the policy of the princess from the start."

"I'd like to hug the Duke of Mizrox," cried Beverly warmly. The officer did not understand her, but Aunt Fanny was scandalized.

"Good Lawd!" she muttered to the boxes and bags.

As the coach rolled deeper and deeper into the rock shadowed wilderness Beverly Calhoun felt an undeniable sensation of awe creeping over her. The brave, impetuous girl had plunged gayly into the project which now led her into the deadliest of uncertainties with but little thought of the consequences.

The first stage of the journey by coach had been good fun. They had passed along pleasant roads, through quaint villages and among interesting people, and progress had been rapid. The second stage had presented rather terrifying prospects, and the third day promised even greater vicissitudes. Looking from the coach windows out upon the quiet, desolate grandeur of her surroundings, poor Beverly began to appreciate how abjectly helpless and alone she was. Her companions were ugly, vicious looking men, any one of whom could inspire terror by a look. She had intrusted herself to the care of these strange creatures in the moment of inspired courage, and now she was constrained to regret her action. True, they had proved worthy protectors as far as they had gone, but the very possibilities that lay in their power were appalling, now that she had time to consider the situation.

The officer in charge had been recommended as a trusted servant of the czar; an American consul had secured the escort for her direct from the frontier patrol authorities. Men high in power had vouched for the integrity or the detachment, but all this was forgotten in the mighty solitude of the mountains. She was beginning to fear her escort more than she feared the brigands of the hills.

Treachery seemed printed on their backs as they rode ahead of her. The big officer was ever polite and alert, but she was ready to distrust him on the slightest excuse. These men could not help knowing that she was rich, and it was reasonable for them to suspect that she carried money and jewels with her. In her mind's eye she could picture these traitors rifling her bags and boxes in some dark pass, and then there were other horrors that almost petrified her when she allowed herself to think of them.

Here and there the travelers passed by rude cots where dwelt woodmen and mountaineers, and at long intervals a solitary but picturesque horseman stood aside and gave them the road. As the coach penetrated deeper into the gorge signs of human life and activity became fewer. The sun could not send his light into this shadowy tomb of granite. The rattle of the wheels and the clatter of the horses' hoofs sounded like a constant crash of thunder in the ears of the tender traveler, a dainty morsel among hawks and wolves.

There was an unmistakable tremor in her voice when she at last found heart to ask the officer where they were to spend the night. It was far past noon, and Aunt Fanny had suggested opening the lunch baskets. One of the guides was called back, the leader being as much in the dark as his charge.

"There is no village within twenty miles," he said, "and we must sleep in the pass."

Beverly's voice faltered. "Out here in all this awful"— Then she caught herself quickly. It came to her suddenly that she must not let these men see that she was apprehensive. Her voice was a trifle shrill and her eyes glistened with a strange new light as she went on, changing her tack completely: "How romantic! I've often wanted to do something like this."

The officer looked bewildered and said nothing. Aunt Fanny was speechless. Later on, when the lieutenant had gone ahead to confer with the guides about the suspicious actions of a small troop of horsemen they had seen, Beverly confided to the old negress that she was frightened almost out of her boots, but that she'd die before the men should see a sign of cowardice in a Calhoun. Aunt Fanny was not so proud and imperious. It was with difficulty that her high strung young mistress suppressed the wails that had long been under restraint in Aunt Fanny's huge and turbulent bosom.

"Good Lawd, Miss Bev'ly, dey'll chop us all to pieces an' take our money an' clo'es an' ev'ything else we done got about us. Good Lawd, le's tu'n back, Miss Bev'ly. We ain' got no mo' show out heah in dese mountains dan a"—

"Be still, Aunt Fanny!" commanded Beverly, with a fine show of courage. "You must be brave. Don't you see we can't turn back? It's just as dangerous and a heap sight more so. If we let on we're not one bit afraid they'll respect us, don't you see, and men never harm women whom they respect."

"Umph!" grunted Aunt Fanny, with exaggerated irony.

"Well, they never do!" maintained Beverly, who was not at all sure about it. "And they look like real nice men—honest men, even though they have such awful whiskers."

"Dey's de wust trash Ah ever did see," exploded Aunt Fanny.

"Sh! Don't let them hear you," whispered Beverly.

In spite of her terror and perplexity she was compelled to smile. It was all so like the farce comedies one sees at the theater.

As the officer rode up his face was pale in the shadowy light of the afternoon, and he was plainly very nervous.

"What is the latest news from the front?" she inquired cheerfully.

"The men refuse to ride on," he exclaimed, speaking rapidly, making it still harder for her to understand. "Our advance guard has met a party of hunters from Axphain. They insist that you—'the fine lady in the coach'—are the Princess Yetive, returning from a secret visit to St. Petersburg, where you went to plead for assistance from the czar."

Beverly Calhoun gasped in astonishment. It was too incredible to believe. It was actually ludicrous. She laughed heartily. "How perfectly absurd."

"I am well aware that you are not the Princess Yetive," he continued emphatically, "but what can I do? The men won't believe me. They swear they have been tricked and are panic stricken over the situation. The hunters tell them that the Axphain authorities, fully aware of the hurried flight of the princess through these wilds, are preparing to intercept her. A large detachment of soldiers is already across the Graustark frontier. It is only a question of time before the 'red legs' will be upon them. I have assured them that their beautiful charge is not the princess, but an American girl, and that there is no mystery about the coach and escort. All in vain. The Axphain guides already feel that their heads are on the block, while as for the Cossacks, not even my dire threats of the awful anger of the white czar when he finds they have disobeyed his commands will move them."

"Speak to your men once more, sir, and promise them big purses of gold when we reach Ganlook. I have no money or valuables with me, but there I can obtain plenty," said Beverly, shrewdly thinking it better that they should believe her to be without funds.

The cavalcade had halted during this colloquy. All the men were ahead conversing sullenly and excitedly with much gesticulation. The driver, a stolid creature, seemingly indifferent to all that was going on, alone remained at his post. The situation, apparently dangerous, was certainly most annoying. But if Beverly could have read the mind of that silent figure on the box she would have felt slightly relieved, for he was infinitely more anxious to proceed than even she, but from far different reasons. He was a Russian convict who had escaped on the way to Siberia. Disguised as a coachman, he was seeking life and safety in Graustark or any out of the way place. It mattered little to him where the escort concluded to go. He was going ahead. He dared not go back; he must go on.

At the end of half an hour the officer returned. All hope had gone from his face. "It is useless!" he cried out. "The guides refuse to proceed. See! They are going off with their countrymen! We are lost without them. I do not know what to do. We cannot get to Ganlook. I do not know the way, and the danger is great. Ah, madam, here they come! The Cossacks are going back."

As he spoke the surly mutineers were riding slowly toward the coach. Every man had his pistol on the high pommel of the saddle. Their faces wore an

His only thought was to get away.

ugly look. As they passed the officer one of them, pointing ahead of him with his sword, shouted savagely, "Balak!"

It was conclusive and convincing. They were deserting her.

"Oh, oh, oh! The cowards!" sobbed Beverly in rage and despair. "I must go on! Is it possible that even such

She was interrupted by the voice of the officer, who, raising his cap to her, commanded at the same time the driver to turn his horses and follow the escort to Balak.

"What is that?" demanded Beverly in alarm.

From far off came the sound of firearms. A dozen shots were fired and reverberated down through the gloomy pass ahead of the coach.

"They are fighting somewhere in the hills in front of us," answered the now frightened officer. Turning quickly, he saw the deserting horsemen halt, listen a minute and then spur their horses. He cried out sharply to the driver: "Come, there! Turn round! We have no time to lose!"

With a savage grin, the hitherto motionless driver hurled some insulting remark at the officer, who was already following his men, now in full flight down the road, and, settling himself firmly on the seat, taking a fresh grip of the reins, he yelled to his horses, at the same time lashing them furiously with his whip, and started the coach ahead at a fearful pace. His only thought was to get away as far as possible from the Russian officer, then deliberately desert the coach and its occupants and take to the hills.

CHAPTER IV.

THOROUGHLY mystified by the action of the driver and at length terrified by the pace that carried them careening along the narrow road, Beverly cried out to him, her voice shrill with alarm. Aunt Fanny was crouching on the floor of the coach between the seats, groaning and praying.

"Stop! Where are you going?" cried Beverly, putting her head recklessly through the window. If the man heard her he gave no evidence of the fact. His face was set forward, and he was guiding the horses with a firm, unquivering hand. The coach rattled and bounded along the dangerous way hewn in the side of the mountain. A misstep or a false turn might easily start the clumsy vehicle rolling down the declivity on the right. The convict was taking desperate chances and, with a cool, calculating brain, prepared to leap to the ground in case of accident and save himself, without a thought for the victims inside.

"Stop! Turn around!" she cried in a frenzy. "We shall be killed. Are you crazy?"

By this time they had struck a descent in the road and were rushing along at breakneck speed into oppressive shadows that bore the first imprints of night. Realizing at last that her cries were falling upon purposely deaf ears, Beverly Calhoun sank back into the seat, weak and terror stricken. It was plain to her that the horses were not running away, for the man had been lashing them furiously. There was but one conclusion—he was deliberately taking her farther into the mountain fastnesses, his purpose known only to himself. A hundred terrors presented themselves to her as she lay huddled against the side of the coach, her eyes closed tightly, her tender body tossed furiously about with the sway of the vehicle. There was the fundamental fear that she would be dashed to death down the side of the mountain, but apart from this her quick brain was evolving all sorts of possible endings—none short of absolute disaster.

Even as she prayed that something might intervene to check the mad rush and to deliver her from the horrors of the moment the raucous voice of the driver was heard calling to his horses, and the pace became slower. The awful rocking and the jolting grew less severe, the clatter resolved itself into a broken rumble, and then the coach stopped with a mighty lurch.

Dragging herself from the corner, poor Beverly Calhoun, no longer a disdainful heroine, gazed piteously out into the shadows, expecting the murderous blade of the driver to meet her as she did so. Pauloff had swung from the box of the coach and was peering first into the woodland below and then upon the rocks to the left. He wore the expression of a man trapped and seeking means of escape. Suddenly he darted behind the coach, almost brushing against Beverly's hat as he passed the window. She opened her lips to call him, but even as she did so he took to his heels and raced back over the road they had traveled so precipitously.

Overcome by surprise and dismay, she only could watch the flight in silence. Less than a hundred feet from where the coach was standing he turned to the right and was lost among the rocks. Ahead, four horses, covered with sweat, were panting and heaving as if in great distress after their mad run. Aunt Fanny was still moaning and praying by turns in the bottom of the carriage. Darkness was settling down upon the pass, and objects a hundred yards away were swallowed by the gloom. There was no sound save the blowing of the tired animals and the moaning of the old negress. Beverly realized with a sinking heart that they were alone and helpless in the mountains, with night upon them.

She never knew where the strength and courage came from, but she forced open the stubborn coach door and scrambled to the ground, looking frantically in all directions for a single sign of hope. In the most despairing terror she had ever experienced she started toward the lead horses, hoping against hope that at least one of her men had remained faithful.

A man stepped quietly from the inner side of the road and advanced with the uncertain tread of one who is overcome by amazement. He was a stranger and wore an odd, uncouth garb. The failing light told her that he was not one of her late protectors. She shrank back with a faint cry of alarm, ready to fly to the protecting arms of hopeless Aunt Fanny if her uncertain legs could carry her. At the same instant another rugged stranger, then two, three, four or five, appeared as if by magic, some near her, others approaching from the shadows.

"Who—who in heaven's name are you?" she faltered. The sound of her own voice in a measure restored the courage that had been paralyzed. Unconsciously this slim sprig of southern valor threw back her shoulders and lifted her chin. If they were brigands they should not find her a cringing coward. After all, she was a Calhoun.

The man she had first observed stopped near the horses' heads and peered intently at her from beneath a broad and rakish hat. He was tall and appeared to be more respectably clad than his fellows, although there was not one who looked as though he possessed a complete outfit of wearing apparel.

"Poor wayfarers, may it please your highness," replied the tall vagabond, bowing low. To her surprise, he spoke in very good English. His voice was clear, and there was a tinge of polite irony in the tones. "But all people are alike in the mountains. The king and the thief, the princess and the jade live in the common fold." And his hat swung so low that it touched the ground.

"I am powerless. I only implore you to take what valuables you may find and let us proceed unharmed!" she cried rapidly, eager to have it over.

"Pray, how can your highness proceed? You have no guide, no driver, no escort," said the man mockingly. Beverly looked at him appealingly, utterly without words to reply. The tears were welling to her eyes, and her heart was throbbing like that of a captured bird. In after life she was able to picture in her mind's eye all the details of that tableau in the mountain pass—the hopeless coach, the steaming horses, the rakish bandit and his picturesque men, the towering crags and a mite of a girl facing the end of everything.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

A Will In Three Words.

In the probate division of the London county court Sir Gorell Barnes was asked to admit to probate the will of Frederick Thorn of Amesbury avenue, Streatham, who died leaving property valued at $4,000. A day or so before he died, counsel stated, Mr. Thorn had a paralytic stroke. He asked for a piece of paper, and they gave an envelope to him. He wrote on the back of it, in the presence of his wife and two of his children, "All to mother. F. T." This was witnessed by Arthur Thorn and Percy Thorn. The will was handed up to his lordship, who remarked that it was probably the shortest one on record. It was duly executed and witnessed and he therefore pronounced for it.

SEASONABLE EATABLES!

California Pink Beans, a comparatively new dish on this market, very palatable and inexpensive dish.

California Lima Beans, Porto Rico Beans, in cans, 15 cents, 2 for 25 cents.

Red Kidney Beans, in cans 15 cents, 2 for 25 cents.

Boston Baked Beans, dried or in cans, any size desired, with or without Tomato Sauce.

Pickled Pig Feet in bulk, or Boneless Pig Feet in cans.

Codfish in any shape desired.

Smoked Herring.

Pickled Salmon.

Mackerel, any size desired.

If you do not find what you are looking for on this bill of fare, pay our store a visit and we will help you to find it.

We carry in season and out of season, all first class Northern and California Fruits, Canned Meats and Vegetables, and handle in their seasons, Florida and Mountain Produce of every kind.

If it something to eat that you are looking for, The Union Grocery Company is the place you will find it.

UNION GROCERY CO.