Beverly of Graustark

By GEORGE BARR McCUTCHEON, Author of "Graustark"

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Beverly was trembling like a leaf. This phase of his villainy had not occurred to her. She was like a bird trying to avoid the charmed eye of the serpent.

"Oh, you—you miserable wretch!" she cried, hoarse with anger and despair. "What a cur you are! You know you are not speaking the truth. How can you say such things to me? I have never wronged you"— She was almost in tears, impotent with shame and fear.

"It has been a pretty game of love for you and the excellent Baldos. You have deceived those who love you best and trust you most. What will the princess say when she hears of last night's merry escapade? What will she say when she learns who was hostess to a common guardsman at the midnight hour? It is no wonder that you look terrified. It is for you to say whether she is to know or not. You can bind me to silence. You have lost Baldos. Take me and all that I can give you in his stead, and the world never shall know the truth. You love him, I know, and there is but one way to save him. Say the word and he goes free to the hills; decline and his life is not worth a breath of air."

"And pretending to believe this of me, you still ask me to be your wife. What kind of a man are you?" she demanded, scarcely able to speak.

"My wife?" he said harshly. "Oh, no. You are not the wife," he added significantly.

"Heavens!" gasped Beverly, crushed by the brutality of it all. "I would sooner die. Would to heaven my father were here. He would shoot you as he would a dog! Oh, how I loathe you! Don't you try to stop me! I shall go to the princess myself. She shall know what manner of beast you are."

She was racing up the steps, flaming with anger and shame.

"Remember, I can prove what I have said. Beware what you do. I love you so much that I now ask you to become my wife. Think well over it. Your honor and his life! It rests with you," he cried eagerly, following her to the door.

"You disgusting old fool," she hissed, "I must have my ..... you know what will happen," he snarled, but he felt in his heart that he had lost through his eagerness.

She flew to Yetive's boudoir, consumed by rage and mortification. Between sobs and feminine maledictions she poured the whole story, in all its ugliness, into the ears of the princess.

"Now, Yetive, you have to stand by me in this," announced the narrator conclusively, her eyes beaming hopefully through her tears.

"I cannot prevent General Marlanx from preferring serious charges against Baldos, dear. I know he was not in your room last night. You did not have to tell me that, because I saw you both at the balcony rail." Beverly's face took on such a radiant look of rejoicing that Yetive was amply paid for the surprising and gratifying acknowledgment of a second period of eavesdropping. "You may depend upon me to protect you from Marlanx. He can make it very unpleasant for Baldos, but he shall pay dearly for this insult to you. He has gone too far."

"I don't think he has any proof against Baldos," said Beverly, thinking only of the guardsman.

"But it is so easy to manufacture evidence, my dear. The Iron Count has set his heart upon having you, and he is not the man to be turned aside easily."

"He seems to think he can get wives as easily as he gets rid of them, I observe. I was going back to Washington soon, Yetive, but I'll stay on now ..... this thing to the end. He can't scare a Calhoun; no sir-ee! I'll telegraph for my brother Dan to come over here and punch his head to pieces."

"Now, now, don't be so high and mighty, dear. Let us see how rational we can be," said the princess gently, whereupon the hot headed girl from Dixie suspended hostilities and became a very demure young woman. Before long she was confessing timidly, then boldly, that she loved Baldos better than anything in all the world.

"I can't help it, Yetive. I know I oughtn't to, but what is there to do when one can't help it? There would be an awful row at home if I married him. Of course he hasn't asked me. Maybe he won't. In fact, I'm sure he won't. I shan't give him a chance. But if he does ask me I'll just keep putting him off. I've done it before, you know. You see, for a long, long time I fancied he might be a prince, but he isn't at all. I've had his word for it. He's just an ordinary person, like — like — well, like I am, only he doesn't look so ordinary. Isn't he handsome, Yetive? And, dear me, he is so impulsive! If he had asked me to jump over the balcony rail with him last night I believe I would have done it. Wouldn't that have surprised old Marlanx?" Beverly gave a merry laugh. The troubles of the morning ..... to fade away under the warmth ..... son who had ente... Yetive sat back and ..... in which this ..... cast out the ..... All persons were white.

"You must not do anything foolish, Beverly," she cautioned. "Your parents would never forgive me if I ..... lowed you to marry or even to fall in love with any Tom, Dick or Harry over here. Baldos may be the gallant, honest gentleman we believe him to be, but he also may be the worst of adventurers. One can never tell, dear. I wish now that I had not humored you in your plan to bring him to the castle. I'm afraid I have done wrong. You have seen too much of him, and—oh, well, you will be sensible, won't you, dear?" There was real concern in the face of the princess. Beverly kissed her rapturously.

"Don't worry about me, Yetive. I know how to take care of myself. Worry about your old Gabriel, if you like, but don't bother your head about me," she cried airily. "Now let's talk about the war. Marlanx won't do anything until he hears from me. What's the use worrying?"

Nightfall brought General Marlanx in from the camps outside the gates. He

But her hand was pointing to the door.

... direct to the castle and boldly ..... him and would ..... ment's hesitation he appealed for ..... ence with the princess, and it was granted.

He proceeded, with irate coolness, to ask how far she believed herself bound to protect the person of Baldos, the guard. He understood that she was under certain obligations to Miss Calhoun, and he wanted to be perfectly sure of his position before taking a step which now seemed imperative. Baldos was a spy in the employ of Dawsbergen. He had sufficient proof to warrant his arrest and execution; there were documents and there was positive knowledge that he had conferred with strangers from time to time, even within the walls of the castle grounds. Marlanx cited instances in which Baldos had been seen talking to a strange old man inside the grounds, and professed to have proof that he had gone so far as to steal away by night to meet men beyond the city walls. He was now ready to seize the guard, but would not do so until he had conferred with his sovereign.

"Miss Calhoun tells me that you have made certain proposals to her, Count Marlanx," said Yetive coldly, her eyes upon his hawkish face.

"I have asked her to be my wife, your highness."

"You have threatened her, Count Marlanx."

"She has exposed herself to you? I would not have told what I saw last night."

"Would it interest you to know that I saw everything that passed on the balcony last night? You will allow me to say, general, that you have behaved in a most outrageous manner in approaching my guest with such foul proposals. Stop, sir! She has told me everything, and I believe her. I believe my own eyes. There is no need to discuss the matter further. You have lost the right to be called a man. For the present I have only to say that you shall be relieved of the command of my army. The man who makes war on women is not fit to serve one. As for Baldos, you are at liberty to prefer the charges. He shall have a fair trial, rest assured."

"Your highness, hear me," implored Marlanx, white to the roots of his hair.

"I will hear what you have to say when my husband is at my side."

"I can but stand condemned, then, your highness, without a hearing. My vindication will come, however. With your permission, I retire to contrive the arrest of this spy. You may depose me, but you cannot ask me to neglect my duty to Graustark. I have tried to save him for Miss Calhoun's sake"— But her hand was pointing to the door.

Ten minutes later Beverly was hearing everything from the lips of the princess, and Marlanx was cursing his way toward the barracks, vengeance in his heart. But a swift messenger from the castle reached the guardroom ahead of him. Colonel Quinnox was reading an official note from the princess when Marlanx strode angrily into the room.

"Bring this fellow Baldos to me, Colonel Quinnox," he said, without ..... ting.

"I regret to say that I have but this instant received a message from her highness commanding ..... send him to the castle," said Quinnox, with a smile.

"The devil! What foolishness is this?" snarled the Iron Count.

"Have a care, sir," said Quinnox stiffly. "It is of the princess you speak."

"Bah! I am here to order the man's arrest. It is more important than"—

"Nevertheless, sir, he goes to the castle first. This note says I am to disregard any command you may give until further notice."

Marlanx fell back amazed and stunned. At this juncture Baldos entered the room. Quinnox handed him an envelope, telling him that it was from the princess and that he was to repair at once to the castle. Baldos glanced at the handwriting, and his face lit up proudly.

"I am ready to go, sir," he said, passing the Iron Count with a most disconcerting smile on his face.

CHAPTER XXIII.

BALDOS started off at once for the castle, his heart singing. In the darkness of the night he kissed the message which had come to him from "her highness." The envelope had been closed with the official seal of Yetive, princess of Graustark, and was sacred to the eye of any one save the man to whom it was directed. The words it contained were burned deep in his brain:

You are ordered to report for duty in the castle. Come at once. Her highness has sent an official command to Colonel Quinnox. Count Marlanx has been here. You are not expected to desert until you have seen me. There is an underground passage somewhere. B.

Baldos went alone and swiftly. The note to Colonel Quinnox had been imperative. He was to serve as an inner guard until further orders. Some one, it was reported, had tried to enter Miss Calhoun's room from the outside during the rainstorm of the previous night, and a special guard was to be stationed near the door. All of this was unknown to Baldos, but he did not ask for any explanations.

He was halfway to the castle when the sharp report of a gun startled him. A bullet whizzed close to his ear! Baldos broke into a crouching run, but did not change his course. He knew that the shot was intended for him and that its mission was to prevent him from reaching the castle. The attendants at the castle door admitted him, panting and excited, and he was taken immediately to the enchanted boudoir of the princess, which but few men were fortunate enough to enter. There were three women in the room.

"I am here to report, your highness."

"That an attempt ..... made to kill a member of the castle guard," he coolly answered.

"Impossible!"

"I am quite certain of it, your highness. The bullet almost clipped my ear."

"Good heavens!" gasped the listeners. Then they eagerly plied him with more agitated questions than he could answer.

"And did you not pursue the wretch?" cried the princess.

"No, your highness. I was commanded to report to you at once. Only the success of the assassin could have made me—well, hesitate," said he calmly. "A soldier has but to obey."

"Do you think there was a deliberate attempt to kill you?" asked the Countess Dagmar. Beverly Calhoun was dumb with consternation.

"I cannot say, madame. Possibly it was an accidental discharge. One should not make accusations unsupported. If you have no immediate need of my services, your highness, I will ask you to grant me leave of absence for half an hour. I have a peculiar longing to investigate." There was a determined gleam in his eyes.

[CONTINUED.]

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JASON M. GREER.
Probate Judge Union County, S. C.
Published in THE UNION TIMES, September 7th, 1906. 36-4t

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