

# Beverly of Graustark

By  
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Author of "Graustark"

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"My-my kindnesses?" cried Marlax. "What do you mean, sir?"

"I mean this, Count Marlax," said Baldos, looking steadily into the eyes of the head of the army. "It was kind and considerate of you to admit me to the fortress, a matter in what capacity, especially at a critical time like this. You did not know me, you had no way of knowing whether my intentions were honest or otherwise, and yet I was permitted to go through the fort from end to end. No spy could wish for greater generosity than that."

An almost imperceptible smile went around the table, and every listener but one breathed more freely. The candor and boldness of the guard won the respect and confidence of all except Marlax. The Iron Count was white with anger. He took the examination out of Lorry's hands and piled the stranger with insulting questions, each calm answer making him more furious than before. At last, in sheer impotence, he relapsed into silence, waving his hand to Lorry to indicate that he might resume.

"You will understand, Baldos, that we have some cause for apprehension," said Lorry, immensely gratified by the outcome of the tilt. "You are a stranger, and, whether you admit it or not, there is reason to believe that you are not what you represent yourself to be."

"I am a humble guard at present, sir, and a loyal one. My life is yours should I prove otherwise."

Yette whispered something in Lorry's ear at this juncture. She was visibly pleased and excited. He looked doubtful for an instant and then apparently followed her suggestion, regardless of consequences.

"Would you be willing to utilize your knowledge as an engineer by suggesting means to strengthen the fortress?" The others stared in fresh amazement. Marlax went as white as death.

"Never!" he blurted out hoarsely.

"I will do anything the princess commands me to do," said Baldos easily.

"You mean that you serve her only?"

"I serve her first, sir. If she were here she could command me to die, and there would be an end to Baldos." And he smiled as he said it. The real princess looked at him with a new, eager expression, as if something had just become clear to her. There was a chorus of coughs and a round of sly looks.

"She could hardly ask you to die," said Yette, addressing him for the first time.

"A princess is like April weather, madam," said Baldos, with rare humor, and the laugh was general. Yette resolved to talk privately with this excellent wit before the hour was over. She was confident that he knew her to be the princess.

"I would like to ask the fellow another question," said Marlax, fingering his sword hilt nervously. "You say you serve the princess. Do you mean by that that you imagine your duties as a soldier to comprise dancing polite attendance within the security of these walls?"

"I believe I enlisted as a member of the castle guard, sir. The duty of the guard is to protect the person of the ruler of Graustark and to do that to the death."

"It is my belief that you are a spy. You can show evidence of good faith by enlisting to fight against Dawsbergen and by shooting to kill," said the count, with a sinister gleam in his eye.

"And if I decline to serve in any other capacity than the one I now?"

"Then I shall brand you as a spy and a coward."

"You have already called me a spy, your excellency. It will not make it true, let me add, if you call me a coward. I refuse to take up arms against either Dawsbergen or Asphain."

The remark created a profound sensation.

"Then you are employed by both instead of one!" shouted the Iron Count gleefully.

"I am employed as a guard for her royal highness," said Baldos, with a square glance at Yette, "and not as a fighter in the ranks. I will fight till death for her, but not for Graustark."

## CHAPTER XVI.

"BY Jove, I like that fellow's coolness," said Lorry to Harry Anguish, after the meeting. "He's after my own heart. Why, he treats us as though we were the suppliants, he the almsgiver. He is playing a game, I'll admit, but he does it with an assurance that delights me."

"He is right about that darned old fort," said Anguish. "His knowledge of such things proves conclusively that he is no ordinary person."

"Yette had a bit of a talk with him just now," said Lorry, with a reflective smile. "She asked him point blank if he knew who she was. He did not hesitate a second. 'I remember seeing you in the audience chamber recently.' That was a facer for Yette. 'I assure you that it was no fault of mine that you saw me,' she replied. 'Then it must have been your friend who rustled the curtains?' said the confounded bluffer. Yette couldn't keep a straight face. She laughed, and then he laughed."

"Some day you may learn more about me," she said to him. "I sincerely trust that I may, madam," said he, and I'll bet my hat he was enjoying it better than either of us. Of course he knows Yette is the princess. It's his intention to serve Beverly Calhoun, and he couldn't do it if he were to confess that he knows the truth. He's no fool."

Baldos was not long in preparing plans for the changes in the fortress. They embodied a temporary readjustment of the armament and alterations in the ammunition house. The gate leading to the river was closed, and the refuse from the fort was taken to the barges by way of the main entrance. There were other changes suggested for immediate consideration, and then there was a general plan for the modernizing of the fortress at some more convenient time. Baldos laconically observed that the equipment was years behind the times. To the amazement of the officials, he was able to talk intelligently of forts in all parts of the world, revealing a wide and thorough knowledge and extensive inspection. He had seen American as well as European fortifications. The Graustark engineers went to work at once to perfect the simple changes he advised, leaving no stone unturned to strengthen the place before an attack could be made.

Two, three weeks went by, and the new guard was becoming an old story to the castle and army folk. He rode with Beverly every fair day, and he looked at her window by night from afar off in the somber barracks. She could not dissipate the feeling that he knew her to be other than the princess, although he betrayed himself by no word or sign. She was enjoying the fun of it too intensely to expose it to the risk of destruction by revealing her true identity to him. Logically that would mean the end of everything. No doubt he felt the same and kept his counsel, but the game could not last forever, that was certain. A month or two more and Beverly would have to think of her return to Washington.

His courage, his cool impudence, his subtle wit, charmed her more than she could express. Now she was beginning to study him from a standpoint peculiarly and selfishly her own. Where recently she had sung his praise to Yette and others she now was strangely reticent. She was to understand another day why this change had come over her. Stories of his cleverness came to her ears from Lorry and Anguish and even from Dangloss. She was proud, vastly proud, of him in these days.

The Iron Count alone discredited the ability and the conscientiousness of the "mountebank," as he named the man who had put his nose out of joint. Beverly, seeing much of Marlax, made the mistake of chiding him frankly and gaily about this aversion. She even argued the guard's case before the head of the army, imprudently pointing out many of his superior qualities in advocating his cause. The count was learning forbearance in his old age. He saw the wisdom of procrastination. Baldos was in favor, but some day there would come a time for his undoing.

In the barracks he was acquiring fame. Reports went forth with unbiased freedom. He established himself as the best swordsman in the service, as well as the most efficient marksman. With the fells and sabers he easily vanquished the foremost fencers in high and low circles. He could ride like a Cossack or like an American cowboy. Of them all, his warmest admirer was Haddan, the man set to watch him for the secret service. It may be timely to state that Haddan watched in vain.

The princess, humoring her own fancy, as well as Beverly's follies, took to riding with her high spirited young guest on many a little jaunt to the hills. She usually rode with Lorry or Anguish, cheerfully assuming the subdued position befitting a lady-in-waiting apparently restored to favor on probation. She enjoyed Beverly's unique position. In order to maintain her attitude as princess the fair young deceiver was obliged to pose in the extremely delectable attitude of being Lorry's wife.

"How can you expect the paragon to make love to you, dear, if he thinks you are another man's wife?" Yette asked, her blue eyes beaming with the fun of it all.

"Pooh!" sniffed Beverly. "You have only to consult history to find the excuse. It's the dear old habit of men to make love to queens and get beheaded for it. Besides, he is not expected to make love to me. How in the world did you get that into your head?"

On a day soon after the return of Lorry and Anguish from a trip to the frontier Beverly expressed a desire to visit the monastery of St. Valentine, high on the mountain top. It was a long ride over the circuitous route by which the steep incline was avoided, and it was necessary for the party to make an early start. Yette rode with Harry Anguish and his wife the countess, while Beverly's companion was the gallant Colonel Quinnox. Baldos, relegated to the background, brought up

the rear with Haddan.

For a week or more Beverly had been behaving toward Baldos in the most cavalier fashion. Her friends had been teasing her, and, to her own intense amazement, she resented it. The fact that she felt the sting of their sly taunts was sufficient to arouse in her the distressing conviction that he had become important enough to prove embarrassing. While confessing to herself that it was a bit trenchant and weak she proceeded to ignore Baldos with astonishing persistence. Apart from the teasing, it seemed to her of late that he was growing a shade too confident.

He occasionally forgot his deferential air and relaxed into a very pleasing but highly reprehensible state of friendliness. A touch of the old jauntness cropped out here and there, a tinge of the old irony marred his otherwise perfect mien as a soldier. His laugh was freer, his eyes less under subjugation, his entire personality more arrogant. It was time, thought she resentfully, that his temerity should meet some sort of check.

And, moreover, she had dreamed of him two nights in succession.

How well her plan succeeded may best be illustrated by saying that she now was in a most uncomfortable frame of mind. Baldos refused to be properly depressed by his misfortune. He retired to the oblivion she provided and seemed disagreeably content. Apparently it made very little difference to him whether he was in or out of favor. Beverly was in high dudgeon and low spirits.

The party rode forth at an early hour in the morning. It was hot in the city, but it looked cold and bleak on the heights. Comfortable wraps were taken along, and provision was made for luncheon at an inn halfway up the slope. Quinnox regaled Beverly with stories in which Greenfall Lorry was the hero and Yette the heroine. He told her of the days when Lorry, a fugitive with a price upon his head, charged with the assassination of Prince Lorenz, then betrothed to the princess, lay hidden in the monastery while Yette's own soldiers hunted high and low for him. The narrator dwelt glowingly upon the trip from the monastery to the city walls one dark night when Lorry came down to surrender himself in order to shield the woman he loved, and Quinnox himself piloted him through the underground passage into the very heart of the castle. Then came the exciting scene in which Lorry presented himself as a prisoner, with the denouement that saved the princess and won for the gallant American the desire of his heart.

"What a brave fellow he was," cried Beverly, who never tired of hearing the romantic story.

"Ah, he was wonderful, Miss Calhoun. I fought him to keep him from surrendering. He beat me, and I was virtually his prisoner when we appeared before the tribunal."

"It's no wonder she loved him and married him."

"He deserved the best that life could give, Miss Calhoun."

"You had better not call me Miss Calhoun, Colonel Quinnox," said she, looking back apprehensively. "I am a highness once in awhile, don't you know?"

"I implore your highness' pardon," said he gaily.

The riders ahead had come to a standstill and were pointing off into the pass to their right. They were eight or ten miles from the city gates and more than halfway up the winding road that ended at the monastery gates. Beverly and Quinnox came up with them and found all eyes centered on a small company of men encamped in the rocky defile a hundred yards from the main road.

It needed but a glance to tell her who comprised the unusual company. The very raggedness of their garments, the unforgettable disregard for consequences, the impudent ease with which they faced poverty and wealth alike, belonged to but one set of men—the vagabonds of the Hawk and Raven. Beverly went a shade whiter. Her interest in everything else flagged, and she was lost in bewilderment. What freak of fortune had sent these men out of the fastnesses into this dangerously open place?

She recognized the ascetic Ravone, with his student's face and beggar's garb. Old Franz was there, and so were others whose faces and heterogeneous garments had become so familiar to her in another day. The tall leader with the red feather, the rakish hat and the black patch alone was missing from the picture.

"It's the strangest looking crew I've ever seen," said Anguish. "They look like pirates."

"Or gypsies," suggested Yette. "Who are they, Colonel Quinnox? What are they doing here?"

Quinnox was surveying the vagabonds with a critical, suspicious eye.

"They are not robbers or they would be off like rabbits," he said reflectively. "Your highness, there are many roving bands in the hills, but I confess that these men are unlike any I have heard about. With your permission, I will ride down and question them."

"Do, Quinnox. I am most curious."

Beverly sat very still and tense. She was afraid to look at Baldos, who rode up as Quinnox started into the narrow defile, calling to the escort to follow. The keen eyes of the guard caught the situation at once. Miss Calhoun shot a quick glance at him as he rode up beside her. His face was impassive, but she could see his hand clench the bridle rein, and there was an air of restraint in his whole bearing.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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