

Beverly of Graustark

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CHAPTER VIII.

BY this time they were passing the queer little huts that marked the outskirts of a habitable community. These were the homes of shepherds, hunters and others whose vocations related especially to the mountains. Farther on there were signs of farming interests; the homes became more numerous and more pretentious in appearance. The rock lined gorge broadened into a fertile valley; the road was smooth and level, a condition which afforded relief to the travelers. Ravone had once more dressed the wounds inflicted by the lion, but he was unable to provide anything to subdue the fever. Baldos was undeniably ill. Beverly, between her exclamations of joy and relief at being in sight of Ganlook, was profuse in her expressions of concern for the hero of the Hawk and Raven. The feverish gleam in his dark eyes and the pain that marked his face touched her deeply. Suffering softened his lean, sun browned features, obliterating the mocking lines that had impressed her so unfavorably at the outset. She was saying to herself that he was handsome after a most unusual cast; it was an unforgettable face.

"Your highness," he said earnestly, after she had looked long and anxiously at his half closed eyes, "we are within an hour of Ganlook. It will be dark before we reach the gates. I know, but you have nothing to fear during the rest of the trip. Franz shall drive you to the sentry post and turn over the horses to your own men. My friends and I must leave you at the end of the mountain road. We are—"

"Ridiculous!" she cried. "I'll not permit it! You must go to a hospital."

"If I enter the Ganlook gates I will be the same as entering the gates of death," he protested.

"Nonsense! You have a fever or you wouldn't talk like that. I can promise you absolute security."

"You do not understand, your highness."

"Nevertheless, you are going to a hospital," she firmly said. "You would die out here in the wilds, so what are the odds either way? Aunt Fanny, will you be careful? Don't you know that the least movement of those bags hurts him?"

"Please do not mind me, your highness. I am doing very well," he said, smiling.

The coach brought up in front of a roadside inn. While some of the men were watering the horses others gathered about its open window. A con-



"Aunt Fanny, will you be careful?"

versation in a tongue utterly incomprehensible to Beverly took place between Baldos and his followers. The latter seemed to be disturbed about something, and there was no mistaking the solicitous air with which they regarded their leader. The pseudo princess was patient as long as possible and then broke into the discussion.

"What do they want?" she demanded in English.

"They are asking for instructions," he answered.

"Instruct them to do as I bid," she said. "Tell them to hurry along and get you a doctor; that's all."

Evidently his friends were of the same opinion, for after a long harangue in which he was obdurate to the last they left the carriage, and he sank back with a groan of dejection.

"What is it?" she anxiously demanded.

"They also insist that I shall go to a surgeon," he said hopelessly. His eyes were moist, and he could not meet her gaze. She was full of exultation. "They have advised me to put myself under your protection, shameless as that may seem to a man. You and you alone have the power to protect me if I pass beyond the walls of Ganlook."

"I?" she cried, all a-flutter.

"I could not thrust my head into the jaws of death unless the princess of Graustark were there to stay their fury. Your royal hand alone can turn aside the inevitable. Alas, I am helpless and know not what to do!"

Beverly Calhoun sat very straight and silent beside the misguided Baldos. After all, it was not within her power to protect him. She was not the princess, and she had absolutely no influence in Ganlook. The authorities there could not be deceived as had been these ignorant men of the hills. If she led

him into the city it was decidedly probable that she might be taking him to his death. She could only petition, not command. Once at Yette's side she was confident she could save the man who had done so much for her, but Ganlook was many miles from Edelweiss, and there was no assurance that intervention could be obtained in time. On the other hand, if he went back to the hills he was likely to die of the poisonous fever. Beverly was in a most unhappy state of mind. If she confessed to him that she was not the princess he would refuse to enter the gates of Ganlook, and be perfectly justified in doing so.

"But if I should fall?" she asked at last, a shiver rushing over her and leaving her cold with dread.

"You are the only hope, your highness. You had better say farewell to the friendly valley," said he wearily. "We can go no farther. The soldiers must be near, your highness. It means capture if we go on. I cannot expose my friends to the dangers. Let me be put down here and do you drive on to safety. I shall fare much better than you think, for I am young and strong and—"

"No! I'll risk it!" she cried. "You must go into the city. Tell them so, and say that I will protect you with my own life and honor."

Fever made him submissive. Her eyes gave him confidence. Her voice soothed his fears. If he possessed them, leaning from the window he called his men together. Beverly looked on in wonder as these strange men bade farewell to their leader. Many of them were weeping, and most of them kissed his hand. There were broken sentences, tear choked promises, anxious inquiries, and the parting was over.

"Where are they going?" Beverly whispered as they moved away in the dusk.

"Back into the mountains to starve, poor fellows. God be kind to them, God be good to them," he half sobbed, his chin dropping to his breast. He was trembling like a leaf.

"Starve?" she whispered. "Have they no money?"

"We are penniless," came in muffled tones from the stricken leader.

Beverly leaned from the window and called to the departing ones. Ravone and one other reluctantly approached. Without a word she opened a small traveling bag and drew forth a heavy purse. This she pressed into the hand of the student. It was filled with Graustark gold, for which she had exchanged American gold in Russia.

"God be with you!" she fervently cried. He kissed her hand, and the two stood aside to let the coach roll on into the dusky shadows that separated them from the gates of Ganlook, old Franz still driving, the only one of the company left to serve his leader to the very end.

"Well, we have left them," muttered Baldos as though to himself. "I may never see them again—never see them again. And how true they have been!"

"I shall send for them the moment I get to Ganlook, and I'll promise pardons for them all!" she cried rashly in her compassion.

"No," he exclaimed fiercely; "you are not to disturb them. Better that they should starve."

Beverly was sufficiently subdued. As they drew nearer the city gates her heart began to fail her. This man's life was in her weak, incapable hands, and the time was nearing when she must stand between him and disaster.

"Where are these vaunted soldiers of yours?" he suddenly asked, infinite irony in his voice.

"My soldiers?" she said faintly.

"Isn't it rather unusual that in time of trouble and uncertainty we should be able to approach within a mile of one of your most important cities without even so much as seeing a soldier of Graustark?"

She felt that he was scoffing, but it mattered little to her.

"It is a bit odd, isn't it?" she agreed.

"Worse than that, your highness."

"I shall speak to Dangloss about it," she said serenely, and he looked up in new surprise. Truly she was an extraordinary princess.

Fully three-quarters of an hour passed before the coach was checked. Beverly, looking from the windows, had seen the lighted windows of cottages growing closer and closer together. The barking of roadside dogs was the only sound that could be heard above the rattle of the wheels. It was too dark inside the coach to see the face of the man beside her, but something told her that he was staring intently into the night, alert and anxious. The responsibility of her position swooped down upon her like an avalanche as she thought of what the next few minutes were to bring forth. It was the sudden stopping of the coach and the sharp commands from the outside that told her probation was at an end. She could no longer speculate; it was high time to act.

"The outpost," came from Baldos, in strained tones.

"Perhaps they won't know us—you, I mean," she whispered.

"Baron Dangloss knows everybody," he replied bitterly.

"What a horrid old busybody he!" she started to say, but thought better of it.

A couple of lanterns flashed at the window, almost blinding her. Aunt Fanny groaned audibly, but the figure of Baldos seemed to stiffen with defiance. Uniformed men peered into the interior with more rudeness and curiosity than seemed respectful to a princess, to say the least. They saw a pretty, pleading face, with wide gray eyes and parted lips, but they did not bow in humble submission, as Baldos had expected. One of the men, evidently in command, addressed Beverly in rough but polite tones. It was a question that he asked, she knew, but she could not answer him, for she could not understand him.

"What do you want?" she put in English, with a creditable display of dignity.

"He does not speak English, your highness," volunteered Baldos, in a voice so well disguised that it startled her. The officer was staring blankly at her.

"Every officer in my army should and must learn to speak English," she said, at her wits' end. "I decline to be questioned by the fellow. Will you talk to him in my stead?"

"I, your highness?" he cried in dismay.

"Yes. Tell him who we are and ask where the hospital is," she murmured, sinking back with the air of a queen, but with the inward feeling that all was lost.

"But I don't speak your language well," he protested.

"You speak it beautifully," she said. Baldos leaned forward painfully and spoke to the officer in the Graustark tongue.

"Don't you know your princess?" he demanded a trifle harshly. The man's eyes flew wide open in an instant and his jaw dropped.

"The princess?" he gasped.

"Don't stare like that, sir. Direct us to the main gate at once, or you will have cause to regret your slowness."

"But the princess was—is coming by the northern pass," mumbled the man.

"The guard has gone out to meet her and"—Baldos cut him off shortly with the information that the princess, as he could see, had come by the lower pass and that she was eager to reach a resting place at once. The convincing tone of the speaker and the regal indifference of the lady had full effect upon the officer, who had never seen her highness. He fell back with a deep obeisance and gave a few bewildered commands to his men. The coach moved off, attended by a party of foot soldiers, and Beverly breathed her first sigh of relief.

"You did it beautifully," she whispered to Baldos, and he was considerably puzzled by the ardor of her praise. "Where are we going now?" she asked.

"Into the city, your highness," he answered. It was beginning to dawn upon him that she was amazingly ignorant and inconsequential for one who enjoyed the right to command these common soldiers. Her old trepidation returned with this brief answer. Something told her that he was beginning to mistrust her at last. After all, it meant everything to him and so little to her.

When the coach halted before the city gates she was in a dire state of unhappiness. In the darkness she could feel the reproachful eyes of old Aunt Fanny searching for her abandoned conscience.

"Ask if Baron Dangloss is in Ganlook, and, if he is, command them to take me to him immediately," she whispered to Baldos, a sudden inspiration seizing her. She would lay the whole matter before the great chief of police and trust to fortune. Her hand fell impulsively upon his and, to her amazement, it was as cold as ice.

"What is the matter?" she cried in alarm.

"You trusted me in the wilds, your highness," he said tensely; "I am trusting you now." Before she could reply the officer in charge of the Ganlook gates appeared at the coach window. There were lights on all sides. Her heart sank like lead. It would be a miracle if she passed the gates unrecognized.

"I must see Baron Dangloss at once," she cried in English, utterly disdaining her instructions to Baldos.

"The baron is engaged at present and can see no one," responded the good looking young officer in broken English.

"Where is he?" she demanded nervously.

"He is at the house of Colonel Goaz, the commandant. What is your business with him?"

"It is with him, and not with you, sir," she said, imperious once more. "Conduct me to him immediately."

"You cannot enter the gates unless you"—

"Insolence!" exclaimed Baldos. "Is this the way, sir, in which you address the princess? Make way for her."

"The princess?" gasped the officer. Then a peculiar smile overspread his face. He had served three years in the castle guard at Edelweiss! There was a long pause, fraught with disaster for Beverly. "Yes, perhaps it is just as well that we conduct her to Baron Dangloss," he said at last. The deep meaning in his voice appealed only to the unhappy girl. "There shall be no further delay, your highness!" he added mockingly. A moment later the gates swung open and they passed through. Beverly alone knew that they were going to Baron Dangloss under heavy guard, virtually as prisoners. The man knew her to be an impostor and was doing only his duty.

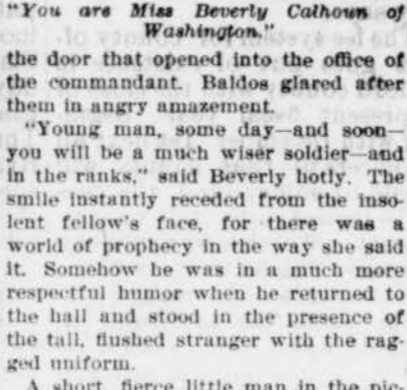
There were smiles of derision on the faces of the soldiers when Beverly swept proudly between the files and up the steps leading to the commandant's door, but there were no audible

remarks. Baldos followed, walking painfully, but defiantly, and Aunt Fanny came last, with the hand bag. The guards grinned broadly as the corpulent negress waddled up the steps. The young officer and two men entered the door with the wayfarers, who were ordered to halt in the hallway.

"Will your highness come with me?" said the officer, returning to the hall after a short absence. There was unmistakable derision in his voice and palpable insolence in his manner. Beverly flushed angrily. "Baron Dangloss is very curious to see you," he added, with a smile. Nevertheless he shrank a bit beneath the cold gleam in the eyes of the impostor.

"You will remain here," she said, turning to Baldos and the negress. "And you will have nothing whatever to say to this very important young man." The "important young man" actually chuckled.

"Follow me, your most royal highness," he said, preceding her through



"You are Miss Beverly Calhoun of Washington."

the door that opened into the office of the commandant. Baldos glared after them in angry amazement.

"Young man, some day—and soon—you will be a much wiser soldier—and in the ranks," said Beverly hotly. The smile instantly receded from the insolent fellow's face, for there was a world of prophecy in the way she said it. Somehow he was in a much more respectful humor when he returned to the hall and stood in the presence of the tall, flushed stranger with the ragged uniform.

A short, fierce little man in the picturesque uniform of a Graustark officer arose as Beverly entered the office. His short beard bristled as though it were concealing a smile, but his manner was polite, even deferential. She advanced fearlessly toward him, a wayward smile struggling into her face.

"I dare say you know I am not the princess," she said composedly. Every vestige of fear was gone now that she had reached the line of battle. The doughty baron looked somewhat surprised at this frank way of opening an interview.

"I am quite well aware of it," he said politely.

"They say you know every one, Baron Dangloss," she boldly said. "Pray, who am I?"

The powerful official looked at the smiling face for a moment, his bushy eyebrows contract; never so slightly. There was a shameless streak of dust across her cheek, but there was also a dimple there that appealed to the grim old man. His eyes twinkled as he replied, with fine obsequiousness:

"You are Miss Beverly Calhoun of Washington."

BEVERLY'S eyes showed her astonishment. Baron Dangloss courteously placed a chair for her and asked her to be seated.

"We were expecting you, Miss Calhoun," he explained. "Her royal highness left St. Petersburg but a few hours after your departure, having unfortunately missed you."

"You don't mean to say that the princess tried to find me in St. Petersburg?" cried Beverly in wonder and delight.

"That was one of the purposes of her visit," said he brusquely.

"Oh, how jolly!" cried she, her gray eyes sparkling. The grim old captain was startled for the smallest fraction of a minute, but at once fell to admiring the fresh, eager face of the visitor.

"The public at large is under the impression that she visited the czar on matters of importance," he said, with a condescending smile.

"And it really was of no importance at all, that's what you mean?" She smiled back securely.

"Your message informing her highness of your presence in St. Petersburg had no sooner arrived than she set forth to meet you in that city, much against the advice of her counselors. I will admit that she had other business there, but it could have waited. You see, Miss Calhoun, it was a great risk at this particular time. Misfortune means disaster now. But Providence was her friend. She arrived safely in Ganlook not an hour since."

"Really? Oh, Baron Dangloss, where is she?" excitedly cried the American girl.

"For the night she is stopping with the Countess Rallowitz. A force of men, but not those whom you met at the gates, has just been dispatched at her command to search for you in the lower pass. You took the most dangerous road. Miss Calhoun, and I am amazed that you came through so safely."

"The Russians chose the lower pass,

I know not why. Of course, I was quite ignorant. However, we met neither brigands nor soldiers, Axphain or Graustark. I encountered nothing more alarming than a mountain lion. And that, Baron Dangloss, recalls me to the sense of a duty I have been neglecting. A poor wanderer in the hills defended me against the beast and was badly wounded. He must be taken to a hospital at once, sir, where he may have the proper care."

Whereupon, at his request, she hurriedly related the story of that trying journey through the mountains, not forgetting to paint the courage of Baldos in most glowing colors. The chief was deeply interested in the story of the goat hunter and his party. There was an odd gleam of satisfaction in his eyes, but she did not observe it.

"You will see that he has immediate attention, won't you?" she implored in the end.

"He shall have our deepest consideration," promised he.

"You know I am rather interested because I shot him, just as if it were not enough that his legs were being torn by the brute at the time. He ought not to walk, Baron Dangloss. If you don't mind, I'd suggest an ambulance," she hurried on glibly. He could not conceal the smile that her eagerness inspired. "Really, he is in a serious condition. I think he needs some quinine and whisky, too, and"—

"He shall have the best of care," interrupted the captain. "Leave him to me, Miss Calhoun."

"Now, let me tell you something," said she, after due reflection. "You must not pay any attention to what he says. He is liable to be delirious and talk in a terrible sort of way. You know, delirious people never talk rationally." She was loyally trying to protect Baldos, the hunted, against any incriminating statements he might make.

"Quite right, Miss Calhoun," said the baron very gravely.

"And now, I'd like to go to the princess," said Beverly, absolutely sure of herself. "You know we are great friends, she and I."

"I have sent a messenger to announce your arrival. She will expect you." Beverly looked about the room in perplexity.

"But there has been no messenger here," she said.

"He left here some minutes before you came. I knew who it was that came knocking at our gates, even though she traveled as Princess Yette of Graustark."

"And, oh, that reminds me, Baron Dangloss, Baldos still believes me to be the princess. Is it necessary to tell him the truth about me? Just at present, I mean? I'm sure he'll rest much easier if he doesn't know differently."

"So far as I am concerned, Miss Calhoun, he shall always regard you as a queen," said Dangloss gallantly.

"Thank you. It's very nice of you to—"

A man in uniform entered after knocking at the door of the room. He saluted his superior and uttered a few words in his own language.

"Her royal highness is awaiting you at the home of the countess, Miss Calhoun. A detail of men will escort you and your servant to her place."

"Now, please, Baron Dangloss," pleaded Beverly at the door, "be nice to him. You know it hurts him to walk. Can't you have him carried in?"

"If he will consent," said he quietly. Beverly hurried into the outer room after giving the baron a smile he never forgot. Baldos looked up eagerly, anxiously.

"It's all right," she said in low tones, pausing for a moment beside his chair. "Don't get up! Goodby. I'll come to see you tomorrow. Don't be in the least disturbed. Baron Dangloss has his instructions." Impulsively giving him her hand, which he respectfully raised to his lips, she followed Aunt Fanny and was gone.

Almost immediately Baldos was requested to present himself before Baron Dangloss in the adjoining room. Refusing to be carried in, he resolutely strode through the door and stood before the grim old captain of police, an easy, confident smile on his face. The black patch once more covered his eye with defiant assertiveness.

"They tell me you are Baldos, a goat hunter," said Baron Dangloss, eying him keenly.

"Yes."

"And you were hurt in defending one who is of much consequence in Graustark. Sit down, my good fellow." Baldos' eye gleamed coldly for an instant; then he sank into a chair. "While admitting that you have done Graustark a great service, I am obliged to tell you that I at least know you to be other than what you say. You are not a goat hunter, and Baldos is not your name. Am I not right?"

"You have had instructions from your sovereign, Baron Dangloss. Did they include a command to cross question me?" asked Baldos haughtily. Dangloss hesitated for a full minute.

"They did not. I take the liberty of inquiring on my own responsibility."

"Very well, sir. Until you have a right to question me, I am Baldos and a goat hunter. I think I am here to receive surgical treatment."

"You decline to tell me anything concerning yourself?"

"Only that I am injured and need relief."

"Perhaps I know more about you than you suspect, sir."

"I am not in the least interested, Baron Dangloss, in what you know. The princess brought me into Ganlook, and I have her promise of help and protection while here. That is all I have to say, except that I have implicit faith in her word."

Dangloss sat watching him in silence for some time. No one but himself knew what was going on in that

shrewd, speculative mind. At length he arose and approached the proud fellow in rags.

"You have earned every consideration at our hands. My men will take you to the hospital, and you shall have the best of care. You have served our princess well. Tomorrow you may feel inclined to talk more freely with me, for I am your friend, Baldos."

"I am grateful for that, Baron Dangloss," said the other simply. Then he was led away, and a comfortable cot in the Ganlook hospital soon held his long, feverish frame, while capable hands took care of his wounds. He did not know it, but two fully armed soldiers maintained a careful guard outside his door under instructions from the head of the police. Moreover, a picked detail of men sallied forth into the lower pass in search of the goat hunter's followers.

In the meantime Beverly was conducted to the home of the Countess Rallowitz. Her meeting with the princess was most affectionate. There were tears, laughter and kisses. The whole atmosphere of the place suggested romance to the eager American girl. Downstairs were the royal guards. In the halls were attendants. All about were maidservants and obsequious lackeys, crowding the home of the kindly countess. At last, comfortable and free from the dust of travel, the two friends sat down to a dainty meal.

"Oh, I am so delighted," murmured Beverly for the hundredth time.

"I'm appalled when I think of the dangers you incurred in coming to me. No one but a very foolish American girl could have undertaken such a trip as this. Dear me, Beverly, I should have died if anything dreadful had happened to you. Why did you do it?" questioned the princess. And then they laughed joyously.

"And you went all the way to St. Petersburg to meet me, you dear, dear Yette!" cried Beverly so warmly that the attentive servant forgot his mask of reverence.

"Wasn't it ridiculous of me? I know Gren would have forbidden it if he had been in Edelweiss when I started. And, more shame to me, the poor fellow is doubtless at the conference with Dawsbergen, utterly ignorant of my escapade. You should have heard the ministry—er—ah"—And the princess paused for an English word.

"Kick?" Beverly supplied.

"Yes. They objected violently. And, do you know, I was finally compelled to issue a private edict to restrain them from sending an appeal to Grenfall away off there on the frontier. Whether or no, my uncle insisted that he should be brought home, a three days' journey, in order that he might keep me from going to St. Petersburg. Of course they could not disobey my edict, and so poor Gren is none the wiser, unless he has returned from the conference. If he has, I am sure he is on the way to Ganlook at this very minute."

"What a whimsical ruler you are!" cried Beverly. "Upsetting everything sensible just to rush off hundreds of miles to meet me! And Axphain is trying to capture you too! Goodness, you must love me!"

"Oh, but I did have a trifling affair of state to lay before the czar, my dear! Tomorrow we shall be safe and sound in the castle, and it will all be very much worth while. You see, Beverly, dear, even princesses enjoy a diversion now and then. One wouldn't think anything of this adventure in the United States; it is the environment that makes it noticeable. Besides, you traveled as a princess. How did you like it?"

And then the conversation related particularly to the advantages of royalty as viewed from one side and the disadvantages as regarded from another. For a long time Beverly had been wondering how she should proceed in the effort to secure absolute clemency for Baldos. As yet she had said nothing to Yette of her promise to him, made while she was a princess.

"At any rate, I'm sure the goat hunters would not have been so faithful and true if they had not believed me to be a princess," said Beverly, paying the way. "You haven't a man in your kingdom who could be more chivalrous than Baldos."

"If he is that kind of a man, he would treat any woman as gently."

"You should have heard him call me 'your highness,'" cried Beverly. "He will loathe me if he ever learns that I deceived him."

"Oh, I think he deceived himself," spoke Yette easily. "Besides, you look as much like a princess as I."

"There is something I want to speak very seriously about to you, Yette," said Beverly, making ready for the cast. "You see, he did not want to enter Ganlook with me, but I insisted. He had been so brave and gallant, and he was suffering so intensely. It would have been criminal in me to leave him out there in the wilderness, wouldn't it?"

"It would have been heartless."

"So I just made him come along. That was right, wasn't it? That's what you would have done, no matter who he was or what his objections might have been. Well, you see, it's this way, Yette: He is some sort of a fugitive—not a criminal, you know, but just some one they are hunting for, I don't know why. He wouldn't tell me. That was perfectly right if he felt that way, wasn't it?"

"And he had fought a lion in your defense," supplemented Yette, with a schoolgirl's ardor.

"And I had shot him in the arm, too," added Beverly. "So of course I just had to be reasonable. In order to induce him to come with me to a hospital I was obliged to guarantee perfect safety to him. His men were