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TRUXTON KING

A STORY OF GRAUSTARK

By GEORGE BARR McCUTCHEON

TRUXTON KING

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A Story of Graustark

By

GEORGE BARR M'CUTCHEON

(CONTINUED.)

Footsteps in the outer room recalled him to the bitter reality of their position. He awoke her and whispered words of encouragement into her bewildered ears. Then he put on his coat and threw himself on the floor, first wrapping the rope about his wrists to deceive the guard.

A key turned in the padlock. Old man Spantz stood in the doorway.

"It is noon," said the old man irascibly. Then he came in and lighted a candle.

"Noon [illegible]th," said Truxton bitterly. "In twenty-four hours it will be all over, eh, Spantz?"

"At noon tomorrow."

Julius Spantz brought in the food for the prisoners, setting it on the floor between them.

"It is usually the duty of our friend Julius to feed me," observed Truxton to his fellow prisoner.

"Julius?" queried the girl from the castle, peering at the man. "Not Julius Spantz of the armory?"

"The same," said Truxton. Julius laughed awkwardly.

"Enough," snarled William Spantz. His manner changed completely, however, when he turned to address the young lady. "I beg to inform you, madam, that your stay is to be brief. Tonight you will be removed to more pleasant quarters that a friend has prepared for you. As for you, my friend," turning to Truxton and smiling ironically, "I deeply deplore the fact that you are to remain. When we next gather in the room beyond a new dispensation will have begun. You may be interested then to hear what we have to say out there."

With a profound bow to the lady and a leer for King he departed, bolting the door behind him. Instantly King was at her side.

"An idea has come to me," he whispered eagerly. "I think I see a way."

"Mr. King, what is it you intend to do? Please tell me. I must know. You heard what he said about taking me to the count's. He meant Marlanx. I will die first."

"No. I will die first. By the way, I may as well tell you that I wasn't thinking altogether of how we are to escape. Why should I save you from Marlanx just to have you hurry off and get married to Vos Engo? It's a mean thought, I know," hastily; "but, just the same, I hate to think of you marrying some one else."

"Some one else?" she questioned, a pucker on her forehead.

"Oh, I know I wouldn't have a ghost of a chance even if there wasn't a Vos Engo. It isn't that," he explained. "I recognize the—er—difference in our stations and"—

"What has all this got to do with your plan to escape?"

"Nothing at all. The point I'm trying to get at is this: Don't you think it's pretty rough on a hero to save the girl for some other fellow to snap up and marry?"

"I think I begin to see," she said, a touch of pink coming into her cheeks.

"That's encouraging," he said, staring gloomily at the food he had put aside. "You are quite sure you promised Vos Engo that you'd marry him?"

"No. I did not promise him that I'd marry him."

"You said you had promised"—

"You did not allow me time to finish. I meant to say that I had promised to let him know in a day or two. That is all, Mr. King." There was a suspicious tremor in her voice.

"What's that?" he demanded. "You—you don't mean to say that— Oh, Lord, I wonder—I wonder if I have a chance—just a ghost of a chance!" He leaned very close, incredulous, fascinated. "What is it that you are going to let him know—yes or no?"

"That was the question I was considering when the brigands caught me," she answered.

"Of course he is in your own class," said Truxton glumly.

She hesitated an instant. "Mr. King, has no one told you my name—who I am?" she asked.

"You are the prince's aunt. That's all I know."

"No more his aunt in reality than Jack Tullis is his uncle."

"Who are you, then?"

"I am Jack Tullis' sister, a New Yorker bred and born, and I live not more than two blocks from your"—

He stared at her in speechless amazement. "Then—then you are not a duchess or a"— he began again.

"Not at all—a very plain New Yorker," she said, laughing aloud. "You are not disappointed, are you? Does it spoil your romance to"—

"Spoil it? Disappointed? No! By George, I—I can't believe that any such luck—no, no, I don't mean it just that way! Let me think it out. Let me get it through my head.

"Miss Tullis," he said, a thrill in his voice, "you are a princess just the same. I never was so happy in my life as I am this minute. It isn't so black as it was. I thought I couldn't win you because you"—

"Win me?" she gasped.

"Precisely. Now I'm looking at it differently. I don't mind telling you that I'm in love with you—desperately in love. It's been so with me ever since that day in the park. I loved you as a duchess or a princess and without hope. Now, I—I—well, I'm going to hope. Perhaps Vos Engo has the better of me just now, but I'm in the lists with him—with all of them. If I get you out of this place—and myself as well—I want you to understand that from this very minute I am trying to win you if it lies in the power of any American to win a girl who has suitors among the nobility."

"Are—are you really in earnest?" she murmured.

"I mean every word of it. I do love you."

"I—I cannot talk about it now, Mr. King," she fluttered, moving away from him in a sudden panic. Presently he went over to her. She was standing near the candle, staring down at the flame, with a strangely preoccupied expression in her eyes.

"Forgive me," he said. "I was hasty, inconsiderate. I"—

"You quite took my breath away," she panted, looking up at him, with a queer little smile.

"I know," he murmured.

Her troubled gaze resumed its sober contemplation of the flame.

"You won't leave me to my fate because you think I'm going to marry—some one else?"

He grew very sober. "Miss Tullis, you and I have one chance in a thousand. You may as well know the truth."

"Oh, I can't bear the thought of that dreadful old man," she cried, abject distress in her eyes.

He gritted his teeth and turned away.

Late in the afternoon Anna Cromer appeared before them, accompanied by two of the men. Curtly she commanded the girl to come forth.

She was in the outer room for the better part of an hour listening to Anna Cromer and Mme. Drovnask, who dinned the praises of the great Count Marlanx into her ears. They bathed the girl's face and freshened her garments. It occurred to her that she was being prepared for a visit of the redoubtable Marlanx himself and put the question plainly.

"No," said Anna Cromer. "He's not coming here. You are going to him. He will not be Count Marlanx after tomorrow, but Citizen Marlanx, one of the people, one of us."

Little did they know Marlanx.

"Julius and Peter will come for you tonight," said Mme. Drovnask, with an evil, suggestive smile.

Truxton was beginning to tremble with the fear that she would not be returned to their room when the door was opened and she came in.

Some time in the tense, suffocating hours of the night they heard the sounds of many footsteps shuffling about the outer room. There were hoarse, guttural, subdued goodbys and well wishes, the creaking of heavy doors and the dropping of bolts. Eventually King, who had been listening alertly, realized that but two of the men remained in the room, Peter Brutus and Julius Spantz.

An hour crept by and another. King was groaning under the suspense. The time was too slowly approaching when he was to attempt the most desperate act in all this sanguinary tragedy.

He had told her of his plan. She knew the part she was to play. And if all went well—ah, then!

Suddenly he started to his feet, his jaws set, his eyes gleaming. The telegraph instrument was clicking in the outer room.

Taking his position near the girl, who was crouching in real dismay, he leaned against the wall, his hands behind him, every muscle strained and taut.

The door opened, and Julius Spantz, bewhiskered and awkward, entered. He wore a raincoat and storm hat and carried a rope in one of his hands.

"Time you were asleep," he said stupidly, addressing King. He turned to the girl. "Come, madam, I must"—

He did not complete the sentence. The whole weight of Truxton King's body was behind the terrific blow that landed on the man's jaw. Julius Spantz's knees crumpled. He lunged against the wall. The man was stunned beyond all power of immediate action. It was the work of an instant to snatch the revolver from his coat pocket.

THE WHOLE WEIGHT OF TRUXTON KING'S BODY WAS BEHIND THE TERIFFIC BLOW.

"Guard the door!" whispered King to the girl, pressing the revolver into her hand, "and shoot if you have to!"

A handkerchief was stuffed into the unconscious man's mouth. The long coat and boots were jerked from his limp body before his hands and feet were bound with the rope he carried. The bushy whiskers and wig were removed from his head and transferred in a flash to that of the American. Then the boots, coat and hat found a new wearer.

Peter Brutus was standing in the stairway leading to the sewer.

"Hurry up, Julius," he called imperatively. "They are below with the boat."

When a tall, grunting man emerged from the inner room bearing the limp figure of a girl in a frayed raincoat he did not wait to ask questions, but rushed over and locked the cell door. Then he led the way down the narrow stairway. His only reply to King's guttural remark in the Graustark language was:

"Don't speak, you fool! Not a word until we reach the river."

A moment later the girl was being lowered through the hole into rough, eager arms. Brutus and his companion dropped through, the secret block of masonry was closed, and off through the shallow waters of the sewer glided the party riverward in the noiseless boat that had come up to ferry them.

There were three men in the boat, not counting Truxton King.

CHAPTER XIV.

ON THE RIVER.

NO word was spoken during this cautious, extraordinary voyage underground. The pseudo Julius supported his charge in the stern of the boat. Peter Brutus sat in the bow, a revolver in his hand, his gaze bent upon the opaqueness ahead.

At last the boat crept out into the rainy, starless night. He drew the skirts of his own mackintosh over her shoulders and head. The night was so inky black that one could not see his hand before his face.

At least two of the occupants opened up their throats and lungs and gulped in the wet, fresh air.

It was now that he began to wonder, to calculate against the plans of their silent escort. Whither were they bound? The occasional creak of an oar, a whispered oath of dismay, the heavy breathing of toilers, the soft blowing of the mist—that was all; no other sound on the broad, still river.

Truxton began to chafe under the strain. His uneasiness was increased by the certain conviction that before long they would be beyond the city, the walls of which were gradually slipping past.

He considered their chances if he were to overturn the frail boat and strike out for shore in the darkness. This project he gave up at once. He did not know the waters or the banks between which they glided. They were past the walls now and rowing less stealthily. Before long they would be in a position to speak aloud. It would be awkward for him.

Suddenly the boat turned to the right and shot toward the unseen bank. They were perhaps half a mile above the city wall. Truxton's mind was working like a triphammer. He was recalling a certain nomad settlement north of the city, the quarters of fishermen, poachers and horse traders. These people, he was not slow to surmise, were undoubtedly hand in glove with Marlanx, if not so surely connected with the misguided committee of ten.

He had little time to speculate on the attitude of the denizens of this unwholesome place. The prow of the boat grated on the pebbly bank, and Peter Brutus leaped over the edge into the shallow water.

"Come, on Julius—hand her over to me!" he cried.

As he leaned over the side to seize the girl in his arms Truxton King brought the butt of the heavy revolver down upon his skull. Brutus dropped across the gunwale with a groan, dead to all that was to happen in the next half hour or more.

Leaning forward, he had the two amazed oarsmen covered with the weapon.

"HANDS UP! QUICK!" HE CRIED.

"Hands up! Quick!" he cried. Two pairs of hands went up, together with strange oaths. Truxton's eyes had grown used to the darkness; he could see the men quite plainly. "What are you doing?" he demanded of Loraine, who, behind him, was fumbling in the garments of the unconscious Brutus.

"Getting his revolver," she replied, with a quaver in her voice.

"Good!" he said exultantly. "Let's think a minute," he went on. "We don't dare turn these fellows loose, even if we disarm them. They'll have a crowd after us in two minutes."

"We'll keep the boat. There! Now push off, Newport." For King had recognized his guard in the witch's hovel in the person of one of the oarsmen.

"What the devil"— began Newport, but King silenced him. The boat slowly drifted out into the current.

"Now row!" he commanded. With his free hand he reached back and dragged the limp Brutus into the boat.

"Can you swim?" demanded King.

"Not a stroke," gasped Newport. "Good Lord, pal, you're not going to dump us overboard! It's ten feet deep along here."

"Pull on your left, hard. That's right. I'm going to land you on the opposite shore."

Two minutes later they ran up under the western bank of the stream, which at this point was fully 300 yards wide. Under cover of the deadly revolver the two men dropped into the water, which was above their waists. The limp form of Peter Brutus was pulled out and transferred to the shoulders of his companions.

"Good night," called out Truxton King cheerily. He had grasped the oars.

"I'll row over to the east side," announced King to the girl, "but I don't like to get too close to the walls. Some one may have heard the shouts of our friends back there."

Not another word passed between them for ten or twelve minutes. She peered anxiously ahead, looking for signs of the barge dock, which lay somewhere along this section of the city wall.

At last the sound of rapidly working rowlocks came to the girl's ears.

"They're after us," grated Truxton in desperation. "They've got word to friends one way or another. By Jove, I'm nearly fagged too! I can't pull much farther. Hello! What's this?"

The side of the boat caromed off a solid object in the water, almost spilling them into the wind blown river.

"The docks!" she whispered. "We struck a small scow, I think. Can you find your way in among the coal barges?"

He paddled along slowly, feeling his way, scraping alongside the big barges which delivered coal from the distant mines. At last he found an opening and pushed through. A moment later they were riding under the stern of a broad cargoless barge, plumb up against the water lapped piles of the dock.

Standing in the bow of the boat, he managed to pull himself up over the slippery edge. It was the work of a second to draw her up after him. He gave the boat a mighty shove, sending it out into the stream once more.

In a few minutes loud curses came from the river, proclaiming the fact that the pursuers had found the empty boat. Afterward they were to learn that Newport's shouts had brought a boat load of men from the opposite bank, headed by the innkeeper, in whose place Loraine was to have encountered Marlanx later on, if plans had not miscarried.

By this time King had located the open space which undoubtedly afforded room for the transfer of cargoes from the dock to the company's yards inside the walls. Without hesitation he drew her after him up this wide, sinister roadway.

The pursuers were trying for a landing, noisily, even boisterously. It struck Truxton as queer that these men were not afraid of alarming the watchmen on the docks or the man at the gate above. Suddenly it came to him that there would be no one there to oppose the landing of the miscreants. No doubt hundreds of men already had stolen through these gates during the night, secreting themselves in the fastnesses of the city, ready for tomorrow's fray.

They rushed up the narrow railway chutes and through one of the numerous gateways that opened out upon the barge docks. No one opposed them. No one was standing guard. From behind came the sound of rushing footsteps. Lightning flashed in the sky, and the rumble of thunder broke over the desolate night.

"They'll see us by the lightning," gasped Truxton, almost ready to drop from faintness and exhaustion.

Following a vivid flash of lightning, two shots were fired by the men who were now plunging up through the gates, a hundred yards or more away. The same flash of lightning showed to King the narrow, muddy street that stretched ahead of them. Instead of doing the obvious thing he turned sharply to the left, between the lines of freight cars. Their progress was slow.

At last they came to the end of their rope. They were literally up against the great city wall.

A car door stood open in front of them. He waited for a second flash of lightning to reveal to him the nature of its interior. It was quite empty. Without hesitation he clambered in and pulled her up after him. They fell over on the floor, completely fagged.

A few minutes later the storm broke. He managed to close the door against the driving torrents.

"We've fooled them," he managed to whisper close to her ear. "They won't look here. You're safe, Loraine. Gad, I'd like to see any one get you away from me now!"

She pressed his arm. Then she was fast asleep.

He sat with his back against the side of the car, a pistol in one hand, the other lying tenderly upon the drenched hair of the girl whose head rested upon his leg. She had slipped down from his shoulder. He did not have the desire or the energy to prevent it. Manfully as he had fought against the impelling desire to sleep, he could not beat it off. His last waking thought was of the effort he must make to reach Dangloss with the warning.

Something stirred in the far end of the car—a still small noise as of something alive that moved with the utmost wariness. A heavy, breathing body crept stealthily across the intervening space, so quietly that a mouse could have made but little less noise.

An instant later the bluish flame of a sulphur match struggled for life, growing strong and steadier in the hand of a man who stood above the sleepers.

CHAPTER XV.

THE GIRL IN THE RED CLOAK.

INSIDE of an hour after the return of the frightened, quivering groom who had escaped from the brigands in the hills Jack Tullis was granted permission by the war department to take a hundred picked men with him in the effort to overtake and capture the abductors of his sister. The dazed groom's story hardly had been told to the horrified brother before he was engaged in telephoning to General Braze and Baron Dangloss. A hurried consultation followed.

Baron Dangloss was sadly upset. Three prominent persons had been stolen from beneath his nose, so to speak. He was beside himself with rage and dismay. This last outrage was the climax. The old man adored the sister of Jack Tullis. He was heartbroken and crushed by the news of the catastrophe.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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