

The Advanced-Guard

BY
SYDNEY C. GRIER

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THE ADVANCED-GUARD.

CHAPTER I.

LADY HAIGH'S KIND INTENTIONS.

FIFTY years ago the great port of Bab-us-Sahel was in its infancy. The modern ranges of wharfs and breakwaters were represented by a single half-finished pier, and vessels still discharged their passengers and cargo a mile from shore, to the imminent peril of life and property. The province of Khemistan had only recently come under British rule, by an operation which was variously described as “the most shameless piece of iniquity ever perpetrated,” and “the inevitable working of the laws of right and justice”; and the iron-willed, iron-handed old soldier who had perpetrated the iniquity and superintended the working of the laws was determined to open up the country from the river to the desert and beyond. His enemies were numerous and loud-voiced and near at hand; his friends, with the exception of his own subordinates, few and far away; but he had one advantage more common in those days than these, a practically free hand. Under “the execrable tyranny of a military despotism,” the labour of pacification and the construction of public works went on simultaneously, and although the Bombay papers shrieked themselves hoarse in denouncing Sir Henry Lennox, and danced war-dances over his presumably prostrate form, no one in Khemistan was a penny the worse—a fact which did not tend to mollify the angry passions concerned.

The wand of the Eastern enchanter was not in the possession of the nineteenth-century empire-builder, even though he might be the great little man whom the natives called the Padishah, and (under their breath) the Brother of Satan; and despite the efforts of a small army of engineers, the growth of the new seaport was but slow. Yet, though the native town was still obnoxious to sight and smell, and the broad roads of the symmetrically planned cantonments were ankle-deep in dust and sometimes knee-deep in sand, there was one improvement to which General Lennox had been obliged to postpone even his beloved harbour-works, and this was the seaside drive, where his little colony of exiles might meet and condole with one another in the cooler hours of the day. Every one rode or drove there morning and evening, exchanging the latest local gossip on ordinary occasions, and news from home on the rare mail-days. It was most unusual to see a man not in uniform in the drive, for mufti was a word which had no place in the General's vocabulary; and it was even whispered that his well-known detestation of civilians sprang from the fact that he could not arbitrarily clap them into scarlet tunics. As for the ladies, their skirts were of a generous amplitude, although the crinoline proper had not yet made its appearance; but instead of the close bonnets universal in fashionable Europe, they wore lace and muslin caps, as their ancestresses had done since the first Englishwoman stepped ashore in India. The more thrifty-minded guarded their complexions with native umbrellas of painted calico; but there were few who did not exhibit one of the miniature parasols, very long in the handle and very small in the circumference, which were usual at home.

The one interest which all the promenaders had in common was the daily recurring uncertainty whether General Lennox would take

his ride late or early. He never failed to put in an appearance and bestow paternal greetings on his flock, who all knew him and each other, keeping a vigilant eye open the while for any newly arrived subaltern who might have broken his unwritten law; but when he was in good time he made a kind of royal progress, saying a word or two to a man here and there, and saluting each lady in turn with the noble courtesy which went out with the last of the Peninsular heroes. He was specially early one evening, able even to notice absentees, and he asked more than once with some anxiety why Lady Haigh was not there—a question which excited the wrathful contempt of ladies of higher official rank. Lady Haigh was only a subaltern's wife, in spite of her title; but she was amusing, a quality which has its attractions for a grizzled warrior burdened with many responsibilities. However, one lady was able to tell him that Sir Dugald Haigh had only just come in with Major Keeling from their trip up-country, and another added that she believed a friend of Lady Haigh's had arrived that morning by the steamer,—there was only one steamer that plied between Bombay and Bab-us-Sahel,—and the General was satisfied. Life and death were not so widely separated in Bab-us-Sahel as in more favoured places; and it happened not unfrequently that a man might be riding in the drive one evening, and be carried to his grave the next.

The Haighs' house stood on the outskirts of the cantonments. It was a small white-washed bungalow, remarkable for the extreme neatness of its compound, and the pathetic attempts at gardening which were evident wherever any shade might be hoped for. Very widely did it differ from its nearest neighbour, a rambling, tumble-down cluster of buildings inhabited by a riotous colony of bachelors, who were popularly alleged to ride all day and drink all night. In view of the amount of work exacted by Sir Henry Lennox

from all his subordinates, this was obviously an exaggeration; but the patch of unreclaimed desert which surrounded Bachelors' Hall, its broken fences, and the jagged heaps of empty bottles here and there, distinguished it sufficiently from the little domain where Sir Dugald and Lady Haigh were conducting what their friends considered a very risky matrimonial experiment. The festive young gentlemen next door lavished a good deal of wonder and pity (as upon a harmless lunatic) upon Sir Dugald. That a man who was hampered by a title and an unproductive Scotch estate should let the latter and carry the former into the Indian army, where it would array all his superiors against him as one man, instead of remaining at home and using title and estate as a bait for an heiress, was strange enough. But that he should proceed further to defy the opinion of those in authority by bringing out a wife—and a plain wife, without money and with a tongue (the bachelors had learnt through an indiscreet lady friend that the bride had dubbed their cheerful establishment “Beer and Skittles”)—seemed to show that he must be absolutely mad. Lady Haigh's relations, on the other hand, regarded her marriage with trembling joy. Girls with aspirations after higher education were fewer in those days than these, and perplexed families did not know how to deal with them. By sheer hard fighting Elma Wargrave had won leave to study at the newly founded Queen's College, but her family breathed a sigh of relief when, after less than a year's work, she announced that she was going to marry Sir Dugald Haigh, whom she had met on a vacation visit. Whatever Elma might take it into her head to do in the future, her husband and not her parents would be responsible, and it would happen at a distance of some thousands of miles. The baronetcy was an undeniable fact, and there was no need to obtrude on people's attention the other fact that the bridegroom was merely a subaltern in the Company's artillery. Hence, when

the wedding had safely taken place, the parents allowed themselves to rejoice more and tremble less, only hoping that poor Sir Dugald would not find he had undertaken more than he could manage. It would have surprised them a good deal to learn that never until this particular evening had the Haighs known even the semblance of a serious disagreement. Lady Haigh had taken her young husband's measure, and adapted herself to it with a cleverness which was really heroic in the case of a high-spirited, quick-tempered girl; and since her arrival in Khemistan had been wont to assure herself that "after the voyage, one could be angelic anywhere."

Perhaps she saw reason to repent of this hasty assurance just now, as she sat facing her husband across a table littered with letters and papers which had formed part of the mail brought that morning by the steamer. Sir Dugald, a small fair man, with the colourless skin which becomes parchment-like instead of red under the influence of an Eastern sun, was still buttoned up in his uniform,—a fact of itself not calculated to improve his temper,—and punctuated his remarks by swinging one spurred heel rhythmically to and fro as he leaned back in his chair. His wife had rushed out to welcome him and pour her story into his ear in the same breath the moment that he dismounted after a long and dusty march; and he could not but be conscious that her muslin gown was tumbled and not of the freshest, her neck-ribbon awry, and her ringlets in disorder. Those ringlets were in themselves a cause for irritation. Elma Wargrave had worn her hair in severe bands of unassuming hideousness, but soon after her marriage Elma Haigh had horrified her husband by adopting ringlets, which were singularly unbecoming to her pleasant, homely face, under the delusion that he liked them. It cost Sir Dugald a good deal to refrain from proclaiming his abhorrence of the change which had been made for his sake; but he was a just

man, and even at this moment of tension did his best not to allow his mind to be prejudiced by the obnoxious curls.

“Surely you must see,” he was saying with studied moderation, “that you have placed me in a most unpleasant position? What if Ferrers should call me out?”

“I should like to see him do it!” was the uncompromising reply. “I should just go and tell the General, and get him arrested.”

Sir Dugald sighed patiently. “But look at it for a moment from Ferrers’ point of view, Elma. He is engaged to this friend of yours, Miss Andromache—what’s her name? Penelope?—and waiting for her to come out. She comes out quite ready to marry him,—trousseau and wedding-cake and all,—and you meet her at the steamer and tell her such things about him that she breaks off the whole thing on the spot, without so much as giving him a chance to clear himself.”

“He drinks, he gambles, he is in the hands of the money-lenders,” said Lady Haigh tersely. “Was she to marry him in ignorance?”

“I don’t for a moment say it isn’t true. But if a man had done such a thing he would have been called a brute and a low cad. I suppose a woman can go and dash all a poor girl’s hopes, and separate her from her lover, and still be considered a friend to her?”

“But he wasn’t her lover, and it was her fears, not her hopes, that I put an end to.”

“My dear Elma!” Sir Dugald’s eyebrows went up.

“She didn’t love him,” persisted Lady Haigh. “Of course it sounds horrid as you put it, but when you know the circumstances you will

say that I couldn't possibly have let it go on. Penelope and Colin used to know Captain Ferrers when they were children. He lived near them, and their father was very kind to him, and used to get him out of scrapes about once a-week. Ferrers was fond of the children, and they adored him. When he went to India, Penelope can't have been more than fourteen, but he asked her if she would marry him when he came home. I can't imagine that he took it seriously, but she did; at any rate, she felt bound by it. A romantic child of that age, with a brother as romantic as herself to keep her up to it—of course she dreamed of him continually. But he scarcely ever wrote to her father, and never to her, and as she grew older she left off thinking about him. Then her father died, and she went to live with her uncle in London while Colin was at Addiscombe. That was when I used to meet her at the College. Why, she never even told me she was engaged! Of course, I didn't know her very well, but well enough to have heard that. And since we came out her uncle died, and her aunt and cousins didn't want her. She's too handsome, you know. And Colin wanted her to come out with him—did I tell you they were twins, and absolutely devoted?—but the aunt said it wasn't proper, until Colin remembered that old foolishness with Ferrers, and at once—oh, it was the most delightful and suitable and convenient plan that could possibly be devised! They had the grace not to thrust her on Ferrers unprepared, but Colin wrote to him to say he was bringing her out by the Overland, and poor Pen wrote to me—and both letters were lost when the *Nuncomar* went down! It was only with dreadful misgivings that Penelope had consented to the plan, and she got more and more miserable when they found no letters at Alexandria or Aden or Bombay. When they arrived here this morning, and still there were no letters and no Ferrers, she made Colin come to me,

though he wanted to go and hunt up Ferrers, and I brought her up here at once, and settled matters.”

“And may I ask how you managed that?”

“I told her the sort of reputation Ferrers bears here, and how, after the way they were keeping it up next door last night, he could not have been down at the steamer even if he had got the letter, and then I sent to ask him to come and see me.”

“Slightly high-handed. But go on.”

“You needn’t pity him. I am sure in his heart he regards me as his dearest friend. I never saw a man so horrified in my life as when I told him that Miss Ross was here. He was positively relieved when I said that from what Miss Ross had learnt of his circumstances, she was sure he had no intention of claiming the promise she gave him in her childhood, and she hoped they would meet as friends, nothing more. He was really thankful, Dugald.”

Sir Dugald allowed himself the luxury of a smile. “Possibly. But surely the right thing would have been to help the poor wretch to pull himself together, and reform him generally, and let her marry him and keep him straight? That would have been a triumph.”

“Let him reform first, and then get her to marry him if he can,” snapped Lady Haigh. “Would you have let a sister of yours marry him?”

“Not if I could help it. But you will allow me to remark that a sister of mine would have had a home open to her here, instead of being thrown upon a brother as young as herself who knows nothing of the place and its ways, and who is coming up-country with us next month.”

“Oh, of course I offered her a home with us,” said Lady Haigh, with outward calmness, but inward trepidation.

Sir Dugald’s eyebrows were slowly raised again. “You offered her a home with us? Then of course there is no more to be said.”

He drew his chair nearer the table, and from the mass of papers selected a book-packet from the ends of which a familiar green wrapper protruded. Opening the parcel carefully with the paper-knife, he threw away the cover, and settled down with an anticipatory smile to enjoy his monthly instalment of Dickens. But he had gone too far. Anger Lady Haigh had expected, to his deliberate movements she was slowly growing accustomed, but that smile was intolerable. She leaned across the table, and snatched the serial from his hand.

“Dugald, I will not have you so rude! Of course I want to talk things over with you.”

“My dear Elma, what is there to talk over? In some miraculous way you have overcome the Chief’s objections to ladies on the frontier, and got leave to bring Miss Ross up with you. Anything that I could say would only spoil your excellent arrangements.”

“But I haven’t seen Major Keeling. How could I, when he only came back with you? And I haven’t got his leave. I want you to do that.”

“No,” said Sir Dugald resolutely. “I had enough to do with getting leave for you to come to Alibad, and I am not going to presume upon it. The Chief will think I want to cry off.”

“Then I’ll ask him myself,” recklessly. “I’m not in abject terror of your great Major Keeling. He’s only a good man spoilt for want of a wife.”

Lady Haigh meant to be irritating, and she succeeded, for her husband had told her over and over again that such a view was purely and hopelessly feminine. Sir Dugald threw down the paper-knife with a clatter, and drew back his chair as if to leave the room.

“If I can’t get him to do it,” she pursued meditatively, “I’ll—let me see——”

“Appeal to Cæsar—otherwise the General, I suppose? That seems to be your favourite plan.”

“Oh dear, no; certainly not. I shall make Penelope ask Major Keeling herself.”

“Now, Elma!” Sir Dugald detected something dangerous in the tone of his wife’s remark. “That’s no good. Just let the Chief alone. He isn’t the man to give in to anything of the kind.”

Lady Haigh seemed impressed, though perhaps she was only thinking deeply, and her husband, instead of resting on his prophetic laurels, unwisely descended to argument.

“He’s not a marrying man; and to go throwing your friend at his head is merely lowering her in his eyes. He would see it in a moment.”

“My dear Dugald!”—Lady Haigh awoke from a brown study—“what extraordinary things you are saying! I haven’t the slightest intention of throwing Penelope at any one’s head. It’s really vulgar

to suspect every woman that comes near him of designs on Major Keeling.”

“Then why do you want to take Miss Ross up with us?”

“Because I am her only friend in India, of course. I wish you wouldn’t put such thoughts into my head, Dugald,” plaintively. “Now if anything should come to pass, I shall always feel that I have helped in bringing it on, and I do hate match-making.”

“But you said she was handsome,” objected the discomfited husband.

“Well, and is Major Keeling the only unmarried man in the world? Why, Captain Ferrers is coming up to Alibad too.”

“So he is. By the bye, didn’t you say he hadn’t seen her since she was a child? My word, Elma, he will have a crow to pluck with you when he finds what you have robbed him of.”

“I haven’t robbed him,” said Lady Haigh serenely. “I have only kept him from taking an unfair advantage of Penelope’s inexperience. He may win her yet. He shall have a fair field and no favour. He is coming here to-night.”

“Oh, that’s your idea of a fair field, is it? No favour, certainly.”

“Of course I want them to meet under my eye, until I see whether there is any hope of his reforming.”

“Well, we shall be a nice little family party on the frontier.”

“Shan’t we? Let me see, Major Keeling is going because he is the heaven-sent leader, and you because you fought your guns so well at Umarganj, and I because you got leave for me. Colin Ross is

going because his father was an old friend of Major Keeling's, Ferrers because the General begged Major Keeling to take him as the only chance of keeping him out of mischief, and Penelope is going because I am going to ask leave for her."

"Don't you hope you may get it? Well, if you have no more thunderbolts to launch, I'll go and get into some cooler things."

CHAPTER II.

THE AUTOCRAT.

THERE was a little informal gathering at the Haighs' that evening. People often dropped in after dinner for some music, for Lady Haigh had actually brought her piano (without which no self-respecting bride then left her native land) up to Bab-us-Sahel with her. True, it had been necessary to float it ashore in its case; but it was unanimously agreed that its tone had not suffered in the very least. To-night there was the additional attraction that Lady Haigh had staying with her a handsome girl just out from home, who was understood, from the report of the other passengers on the steamer, to play the guitar and sing like an angel. Lady Haigh herself had no love for music whatever, and in these days public opinion would have forbidden her to touch an instrument; but she did her duty as hostess by rattling off one of the dashing, crashing compositions of the day, and then thankfully left her guest to bear the burden of the entertainment. The ring of eager listeners that surrounded Penelope Ross, demanding one song after another, made her feel that she was justified in so doing; and after she had seen the obnoxious Captain Ferrers enter, and satisfied herself that he perceived too late what a treasure he had lightly thrown away, she slipped out on the verandah to think over the task she had rashly set herself in her contest with her husband. How was Major Keeling, who hated women, and had merely been induced to condone Lady Haigh's own existence because he had asked for Sir Dugald's services without knowing he was married, to be persuaded to allow Penelope to accompany her to Alibad?

“I know he is dining at Government House to-night,” she reflected forlornly, “or I might have asked him to come in for some music. But then he would have been just as likely to send a *chit* to say that he disliked music. Men who hate women are such bears! And if I ask him to dinner another night, he will see through it as soon as he finds Penelope is here. And yet I must get things settled at once, or Penelope will think she is unwelcome, and Colin will persuade her to do something quixotic and detestable—marry Ferrers, or go out as a governess, or—— Why, surely——”

She ran to the edge of the verandah, and peered across the parched compound to the road. Above the feeble hedge of milk-bush she could see the head and shoulders of a horseman, of the very man with whom her thoughts were busy. The shock of black hair and short full beard made Major Keeling unmistakable at a time when beards were few, although there was no “regulation” military cut or arrangement of the hair. The fiercest-looking officer in Lady Haigh’s drawing-room at this moment, whose heavy moustache and truculent whiskers gave him the air of a swashbuckler, or at least of a member of Queen Cristina’s Foreign Legion, was a blameless Engineer of strong Evangelical principles. Lady Haigh saw at once the state of the case. The gathering at Government House had broken up at the early hour exacted by Lady Lennox, who was a vigilant guardian of her warrior’s health, and Major Keeling was whiling away the time by a moonlight ride before returning to his quarters. To summon one of the servants, and send him flying to stop the Major Sahib and ask him to come and speak to Lady Haigh, was the work of a moment; for though Major Keeling might be a woman-hater, he had never yet rebelled against the sway which his subordinate’s wife established as by right over all the men around her, for their good. Lady Haigh disliked the

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