

**The
Flag of the Adventurer**

BY
SYDNEY C. GRIER

Table of Contents

- CHAPTER I. MAJOR AND MRS AMBROSE.
CHAPTER II. THE RIFT IN THE LUTE.
CHAPTER III. COLONEL BAYARD'S BURDEN.
CHAPTER IV. A LUCKLESS DAY.
CHAPTER V. THE SEAL OF SOLOMON.
CHAPTER VI. ENTER THE ADVENTURER.
CHAPTER VII. THE OLD ORDER CHANGES.
CHAPTER VIII. TOO CLEVER BY HALF.
CHAPTER IX. DINNER AT THE GENERAL'S.
CHAPTER X. A CONTEST OF WITS.
CHAPTER XI. DEEDS, NOT WORDS.
CHAPTER XII. AN ERROR OF JUDGMENT.
CHAPTER XIII. A LAST EFFORT.
CHAPTER XIV. OUT OF THE FRYING-PAN—
CHAPTER XV. —INTO THE FIRE.
CHAPTER XVI. THE MORROW OF VICTORY.
CHAPTER XVII. SUPPORTED ON BAYONETS.
CHAPTER XVIII. PLUCK AND LUCK.
CHAPTER XIX. THE SECOND ROUND.
CHAPTER XX. IF SHE WILL, SHE WILL.
CHAPTER XXI. WELL AND TRULY LAID.

CHAPTER XXII. THE BELLE AND THE BAUBLE.

CHAPTER XXIII. BRIAN TO THE RESCUE.

CHAPTER XXIV. A SORE STRAIT.

CHAPTER XXV. USE AND WONT.

CHAPTER I.

MAJOR AND MRS AMBROSE.

“AT last!” murmured Eveleen Ambrose with heartfelt relief, gaining the unsteady deck by dint of a frantic clutch at her husband’s arm, and cannoning helplessly against an unfortunate man who happened to be standing near the head of the ladder. “Oh, I beg your pardon!” as he staggered wildly and recovered himself, with a look of mortal offence on his face; “I am so sorry—I——”

“Steady!” said her husband sharply, retrieving her from an unintentional rush across the deck, and setting her up in a corner. “What’s the matter with you—eh?”

“The matter?” Eveleen’s Irish mind was so unhappily constituted that it saw humour where none was visible to others. She began to laugh weakly. “The matter? Oh, nothing at all, of course!”

“Hysterics now, I suppose.” Richard Ambrose’s voice was rough.

“I am *never* hysterical!” indignantly. “But after four days and nights of being tossed about like a cork in that cabin down there, till I know the feel of every inch of the floor and ceiling of it—and hard enough they are, I can tell you!—mayn’t I have your gracious leave to be just a little weeshy bit shaky?”

“Exaggeration is not wit,” he growled. “You have my free leave to feel as you like, provided it don’t make you go about knocking people down.”

Tears—never very far from laughter in Irish eyes—rose rebelliously, and Eveleen turned quickly to gaze at the shore whose

first appearance she had hailed with so much joy. There was nothing particularly attractive about the long line of mud-coloured coast backed by low mud-coloured hills, beyond a wide—still horribly wide—waste of tumbling waters; but it was land, blessed solid land! The man against whom she had cannoned spoke suddenly—she had the instant idea that he had been trying to make up his mind whether the circumstances warranted his addressing her without an introduction.

“The fact is, ma’am, ladies have no business in these steamboats. The cabin may have seemed uncommon incommodious to you, but in order that you and your companions might enjoy it, four of the gentlemen on board had no cabin at all.”

“Oh!” in dismay. “But ’twas not for you to tell me that!” she flashed out at him.

“I had a reason, ma’am—to convince you that you should not be here.”

“And pray, sir, what other way would we poor females get to Khemistan?”

“My point precisely, ma’am.” He spoke under difficulties, swaying to and fro and holding fast to the rail. “Khemistan is no place for European females—nor will be for years to come. But when charming ladies take it into their pretty heads to go there, what is poor Hubby to do? ‘My dear, believe me, I can’t take you with me.’ ‘Oh, but you will, won’t you?’ ‘Quite impossible, my dear.’ ‘Ah, but you can do it if you like, I know. And you must.’ And he does—naturally.”

Richard Ambrose chuckled disagreeably, and the colour rose in his wife's cheeks. "It's a bachelor y'are, sir, by your own confession," she said sweetly to the stranger. "No married man would dare to draw such a picture. The best I can wish you is that you may find how true it is!" She meant to end with a little contemptuous curtsy, but the moment she loosed her hold of the shawl over her head, the wind caught it and hurled it full in the stranger's face. This time he did lose his footing, and went slipping and sliding across the deck till he was brought up by the bulwarks.

"One for you, Crosse!" cried Richard Ambrose loudly, and holding his wife with one hand, secured the loose end of shawl and tucked it in with the other. "Can't you look after your own fallals?" he demanded. "It ain't enough to make out that you wanted to come and I couldn't do without you—eh?"

"I did want to come," persisted Eveleen stoutly. "And pray would you have me tell people y'are bringing me here for a punishment because you can't find a keeper in Bombay to look after me?"

"Pray remember you are not a child," he said—so coldly that she grew red again, and moved as far from him as the necessity of submitting to his protecting arm would allow. But it was difficult to maintain an attitude of dignified displeasure in the circumstances.

"Why, we are anchoring already!" she cried in dismay a moment later. Her husband smiled superior.

"Precisely, my dear. Now you will have an opportunity of experiencing the full pleasure of landing at Bab-us-Sahel. It might be worse, however, for the tide is fairly high."

Privately Eveleen wondered how low water could possibly make the landing worse, when the passengers and their luggage had been transferred from the rolling steamer to an equally unsteady tug, and thence into large open boats, in which the water seemed terribly near—and actually was, as she discovered on finding the wet mounting higher and higher up her skirts. They were to land at a pier, she knew, which was comforting, but alas! there was another transshipment before reaching it, this time into light canoes, since the boats drew too much water to enter the creek in which it stood. Dazed, shaken, and sea-sick, Eveleen had no pride left. With closed eyes, she leaned her swimming head against her husband's shoulder as they came into smoother water, and told herself that this misery had lasted so long she would not be surprised if the tide had gone out. What would they do then? she speculated in a detached kind of way—change into some other kind of craft, or paddle up and down and dodge the rollers until the flow?

“There's Bayard waiting to meet us!” said her husband sharply. She opened one eye weakly, and discerned figures on the pier.

“The celebrated Colonel Bayard!” she quoted in a dreamy whisper, and shut it again.

“But not Mrs Bayard!” Richard was evidently injured.

“Perhaps—the sight of—this sea—makes her—ill. I would not—wonder,” murmured Eveleen.

“Nonsense, my dear! Considering my friendship with Bayard, and the kindness she professed towards you when she heard——”

“Her husband maybe teased her—to come—so she wouldn't,” and even in her misery Eveleen was conscious of triumph. It was

something to have reduced Richard to speechless indignation, were it but for a moment.

“Halloo, Ambrose! Glad to see you, my dear fellow!” The words sounded startlingly near, and looking up quickly, she saw a small stoutish dark-moustached officer hanging perilously on what looked like a ladder just above them. As the canoe rocked this way and that with the motion of the waves, he seemed to be performing the wildest acrobatic feats, as though it were the pier and not the boat that rose and fell. She closed her eyes again hopelessly.

“Your poor wife overcome by all this landing business? I don’t wonder. Lift her up, man. Now, ma’am, give me your hand, and we’ll have you on firm ground in no time.”

The deep commanding voice mastered even her helpless lassitude, and she looked up into the kindest eyes she had ever seen. Her hand was seized in a strong clasp, and somehow—between Richard and Colonel Bayard—she was hoisted up the ladder before she had time to notice with horror how very rickety it was.

“Firm ground!” she said reproachfully when she reached the top, for the pier seemed to be swaying every way at once, and between its sun-warped timbers the water was disconcertingly visible.

“In a moment, in a moment!” said Colonel Bayard soothingly, as though speaking to a child. “I brought my wife’s palanquin for you, but I had not realised how bad the landing would be. Would you prefer to wait here while I have it fetched?”

“Indeed I would not—not here!” said Eveleen with a shudder, and supported by the two men, she stumbled uncertainly along the pier.

“I trust Mrs Bayard ain’t ill?” said Richard.

“You could answer that better than I, my good fellow, for you must have passed her on your way up from Bombay. I had to send her down by the next steamer after you had started. So end my hopes of making a home up here. Heigh-ho!”

He gave a great sigh, and Eveleen looked up at him sympathetically. Not noticing that they had come to the end of the pier, she stumbled wildly in the loose sand, and fell. The Resident had her up again in a moment.

“My dear lady, forgive me!” he cried, in deep contrition. “I fear Khemistan is giving you a sorry welcome.”

“Ah, but think how I’ll be adoring the place when I fall on my knees at the first sight of it!” she said, laughing feebly, while her husband—in awful silence—did his best to brush the wet sand from her gown.

“That’s the spirit!” said Colonel Bayard approvingly. “Mrs Ambrose is cut out for the frontier, Richard. Now, ma’am!”

He was handing her into the waiting *palki*, while she looked longingly at the ponies waiting for the two men. If only there were one for her! But Colonel Bayard would probably be scandalised, and Richard certainly would, if she proposed to ride through the town on a man’s saddle, with a stirrup thrown over to serve as pommel.

“The many times I’ve done it at home!” she lamented to herself. “And sure this place might be in Ireland, only that it’s brown instead of green.”

But she settled herself meekly on the cushions, and closed her eyes, that the swaying of the *palki* might not recall too vividly the

motion of the steamer. She was not losing much, she told herself, for the inhabitants of Bab-us-Sahel appeared to live either in mud-heaps or within high mud walls, both windowless, and there was not a tree to be seen. She must have gone to sleep before very long, for she woke with a start when the reed blind was drawn aside, and Colonel Bayard's face appeared in the doorway—a sepoy guard standing to attention behind him.

“Welcome to Government House, Mrs Ambrose! Let me say as the Spaniards do, ‘This house is yours, ma’am.’ Turn it upside down if you like, and do me the favour of chivying the servants as much as you please. My wife always declares I spoil ’em when she ain’t with me.”

“Ah, but tell me now—will you let me ride your horses?” demanded Eveleen, pausing as he helped her out. The mud-built town was below them now, for they were at the top of a long slope. An immensely wide road with ostentatiously white houses on either side, so rigidly spaced that they looked like tents in a camp, led down to a muddy swamp, and by a causeway across it to the mud-heap which was Bab-us-Sahel. Some attempt had been made by most of the householders to enclose their domains with a hedge, but the only available plant seemed to be a weak and straggly kind of cactus, which left more gaps than it filled. Government House was mud-built and white-washed like the rest, long and narrow and surrounded by verandahs, and boasted an imposing flagstaff in front, together with a circular enclosure, intended as a flower-bed, in which grew a few debilitated shrubs. Glaring sunshine and shadeless sand were the salient features of the scene from which Eveleen withdrew her eyes as she looked up at her host.

“With all my heart, if I had any,” he responded genially. “But I’ll confess I am a precious lazy fellow when there’s no hunting in question. Bring me *khubber* of a tiger, and I’ll ride all day and all night to get at him, but here——! My dear ma’am, this respectable elderly gentleman”—he indicated the pony from which he had just dismounted—“represents my whole stable, and you can see by his figure that he don’t get much to do.”

“And such a galloping country!” Deep commiseration was in Eveleen’s tone as she looked down the other side of the rise to the bare rolling sandy plain. “I’ll have to wait till my own horses are landed, then, before challenging you to a race.”

“Mrs Ambrose is going to wake us all up, I see, Richard!” Colonel Bayard beamed as he handed her into the house. He had to perfection the gift of doing little things greatly, and Queen Victoria herself could not have been ushered in with more *empressement*. “Now if anything is not as you like it, ma’am, command me and all I have, I beg of you. You won’t feel bound to show yourself at table if you ain’t equal to it? Ambrose and I will devour our grub in solitude, like a pair of uncivilised bachelors again.”

“As if I’d allow that! Sure I’ll be there!” and Eveleen nodded brightly as she disappeared under the curtain that hung before the doorway of her room. Her mercurial spirits were recovering fast from the gloom of the voyage. Everything was interesting, and therefore cheerful—the new country, the unfamiliar house, this dear chivalrous Colonel Bayard. What a shame it was that his wife had let herself be sent away! “Sure I’d have stuck to him with teeth and claws!” she said to herself, and broke into her ready laughter at the thought of the inconvenience of such a devotion to its object.

Several hours of healthy slumber left Eveleen almost restored to her usual self, though still a little languid and pale. Her luggage had arrived while she slept, and also her ayah, who was much less welcome. Ketty was an elderly Goanese woman of vast experience and monumental propriety, and Eveleen suspected that Richard Ambrose had chosen her out to keep his erratic wife in order. Her last mistress had been the lady of a Member of Council, and what Ketty did not know of the manners and customs proper to ladies in high places was not worth knowing. Mutely, but firmly, she indicated on all occasions what ought to be worn, and also the appropriate style of hair-dressing, quite regardless of the wishes of her Madam Sahib—the very word showed in what high society she had moved, for in all but very lofty households the English lady was still alluded to as the Beebee. But to-day Eveleen's reviving spirits led her to trample ruthlessly on Ketty. The ayah had laid out a white gown, and it was summarily rejected. Eveleen had all the Irishwoman's love of easy old clothes, and in the open trunk she caught sight of a beloved garment that had once been a rather bright blue, but was now faded to a soft dull shade, the proximity of which only a milky skin and Irish blue eyes could endure with impunity. That dress she would wear and no other.

“A stiff starchy thing like that white brilliant!” she was talking to herself again, as she often did, since Ketty's lack of response tried her sorely after the companionable garrulity of Irish servants. “No, I'll be comfortable to-night—haven't I earned it? Sure I'd be a regular ghost in white, and why would I want to haunt poor Colonel Bayard's house before I'm dead?” Then severely, “Ayah, I said the blue. So that's done!” triumphantly. “And now what to wear with it? I know what I'd like,” turning over the trinkets which Ketty, with an aloof and reserved air—as of one who refused all

responsibility for such doings—laid before her, “and that’s you, you beauty. Isn’t it a real match for my eyes y’are, as Uncle Tom said when he gave you to me?” She took up a disc of flawed turquoise, some two inches across, set in silver and hanging from a steel chain, and looked at it affectionately, but put it down again. “No, Ambrose would have too much to say about my childish taste for ‘something large and smooth and round,’ and why would I provoke him when I needn’t? So we’ll be quite proper and suitable, and wear his bracelet with his hair and his portrait in it. Ah, my dear, what has happened you that you’d be so changed since you gave me that?” This was added in a painful whisper, but in a moment Eveleen had brushed the tears hastily from her eyes and turned to the door, accepting impatiently the handkerchief with which Ketty hurried after her.

Colonel Bayard was the prince of hosts. He told Eveleen that were he only a younger man, he would have a dozen duels on his hands the next morning for depriving the rest of the European community, if only for one day, of the honour of meeting her at supper—and all owing to his thinking she might be fatigued, which he saw now was quite unnecessary. Perhaps the voyage had been better than he feared. It could have been worse, she assured him, and described its horrors dramatically for his amusement and sympathy.

“And there was a cross officer—oh, and his name *was* Crosse!” she laughed delightedly—“said that ladies had no business on board ship. There’s a nasty wretch for you!”

“Poor Crosse was uncommonly riled—had no cabin all the voyage,” explained her husband. “But he got precious little compassion from Mrs Ambrose.”

“And he deserved none—did he, ma’am?” said Colonel Bayard heartily. “Now I know why Crosse chose to go on at once and catch the steamer starting for Qadirabad to-morrow evening. He was afraid he’d be hooted out of decent society if it was known he had said such an atrocious thing. But talking of steamers, Mrs Ambrose, don’t use up all your adjectives too soon, or you’ll have none left for the river craft, and the Bombay boats are palaces to ’em!” Precise people still talked about “steamboats” in the early ’forties, but the word steamer had established itself in familiar use, and Eveleen took it up promptly.

“But what I want to know is, why wouldn’t you have better steamers, if that’s your only way of getting about?” she demanded. “And tell me, why wouldn’t you have a better landing-place here?”

“Why should we?” Colonel Bayard bristled up unaccountably. “The place ain’t ours.”

“But sure it’s as good as ours!”

“Not a bit of it. It’s entirely our own fault that we are here, and if we set to work to improve the place, the people to whom it belongs would suspect us of wanting to land more troops and take possession of it—most naturally, in my opinion. Therefore I won’t have it touched. It’s the same with the steamers. The people here don’t want ’em—don’t share our craze for getting about quickly—and the landowners swear the wash damages the river banks.”

“That old codger Gul Ali Khan making bobbery about his *shikargah* again?” asked Richard Ambrose sympathetically, and thereafter the talk became local and technical in the extreme, while Eveleen listened fascinated. This was what she loved—and her husband would never talk to her about his work, and was chary of

affording information even when she asked for it. Now he forgot her intrusive presence, and talked simply and naturally, while she sat with her head a little on one side and drank in admiringly what he said.

Presently they were speaking of public affairs, and of the Governor-General's tardy permission to the punitive expedition against Ethiopia to take—at its commander's pleasure and on his responsibility—a return route which might serve to bring home the abiding nature of British power to a people hugging delicious memories of a disaster which had shaken the white man's prestige throughout Asia.

“They were saying at Bombay that Lord Maryport consulted old Lennox before he consented—or at any rate that Lennox had given him the advice,” said Richard.

“Much more likely!” said Colonel Bayard quickly. “Well, he will always have that to his credit, at any rate—that we were not left to be the laughing-stock of the East. Oh, I have nothing against the old fellow, provided he stays down where he is, and don't come meddling up here.”

“But don't you like Sir Harry Lennox, Colonel Bayard?” asked Eveleen—her tone suggesting that she did.

“Don't I say I have nothing against him, my dear lady? But there's no earthly reason for the Bombay C.-in-C. to come poking about in Khemistan. It ain't his to poke about in, for one thing.”

“That little difficulty wouldn't stop him,” said Ambrose drily. “You should hear the Bombay people talk. He's fluttering their dovecots for 'em, and no mistake.”

“Oh, well, we all know there are plenty of dark corners that want sweeping out, and he’s welcome to do it. Did you get a sight of him when you were down there?”

“He happened to be in the town, so I went to pay my respects. The queerest old ruffian you ever saw—black as a nigger, with a beak like any old Jew in the bazar, and whiskers streaming every way at once.”

“It’s to hide the scar he got at Busaco he wears them long,” broke in Eveleen indignantly. “He has been severely wounded seven times—it’s covered with scars he is entirely.”

“And would feel himself amply repaid if he knew Mrs Ambrose kept count of ’em, I’ll be bound,” said Colonel Bayard gallantly. “Is the old General a friend of yours, ma’am?”

“He is, indeed. At least, I met him when I was at Mahabuleshwar, and he was very kind. He might have been an Irishman.”

“Really? Well, they say that, thanks to being born in Ireland, he has all the Irish vices without a drop of Irish blood in his veins.”

“Mrs Ambrose is Irish—you may not be aware——” broke in Major Ambrose hastily.

“My dear lady, forgive me!” Colonel Bayard’s gesture of contrition would have disarmed a heart of stone. “What have I said—anything to wound——?”

“Not a bit of it!” Eveleen flashed back at him. “We are not wild Irish, don’t you know—the tame kind. We were always taught to behave nicely and try to be English.”

“Mrs Ambrose would jest on her deathbed, I believe,” said her husband, rather uncomfortably.

“*Absit omen!*” Colonel Bayard looked quickly at Eveleen to see whether the words had hurt her, but she smiled back with twinkling eyes.

“Now you see what Ambrose is in private life—always talking about deathbeds and the poorhouse and cheerful things of that sort. There! I’ve forgotten again. The poorhouse is a solemn subject, and not to be mentioned in the same breath with a joke.”

She glanced with mock apology at her husband, but there was a touch of defiance in the tone, and Colonel Bayard hastened to smooth matters over. “Well, ma’am, I have forgot what it was I said—though I’m sure you remember it—but you’ll oblige me by considering it unsaid. I’ll swear Sir Harry Lennox is the greatest hero since Achilles if that will please you—provided he keeps away from Khemistan.”

“Ah, but why?” with poignant reproach. “If he comes, he’ll be bringing Brian with him—my brother.”

“My dear, what nonsense are you talking?” interjected her husband. She drew back a little.

“It was nonsense, of course. Why would he come at all? But if he did come—why, Sir Harry loves his Irishmen, as everybody knows.”

“Still I hope he won’t bring ’em here. We want no more British troops in Khemistan, Mrs Ambrose. When we came here three years ago it was doing one injustice in order to do another. We wanted to use Khemistan as a stepping-stone to get at Ethiopia, and

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