

An Impending Sword

AN ADVENTURE BY THE SEA

BY HORACE ANNEVELL VAGHELL

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CHAPTER III

Picture to yourself, if the pigments on your palette are bright enough, a landscape blazng with primary colors; stainless skies of vivid blue, a dazzling ribbon of white surf, red sandstone cliffs, and, in the foreground, a field of gold embroidered and lavishly with millions of yellow poppies.

Here, twenty-four hours later, I found the sanctuary, the home of the Gerards, a comfortable, red tiled cottage, encompassed with broad verandas, lawns and shrubberies, and groves of cypress and eucalypti.

The faithful Greek, Demetrios, received me. My first impressions of this remarkable man were recording. In his physical aspect I could find no clue to his character. He stood before me a colossal, impassive and impressive, reminding me, absurdly enough, of the Matterhorn as I first saw it from Zermatt.

"How delightful! It seems such a satisfactory way of making an income. You jot down your ideas, I'm sure Mr. Livingston, you carry a full cargo of ideas, and then you send them to an editor. He writes a flattering letter and encloses a check."

"Does he?" "Not always." "Of course one can't please every one, but sooner or later you get the check; and it seems such an easy way of making money. Oh, I don't care of writing only for money. You don't look as if you cared about the Almighty Dollar, Art, I suppose, is your god."

"I have no particular god, Miss Gerard, but I have a goddess." "Have you really a goddess?" she asked in a tone of the keenest interest. "Really and truly?" "Really and truly."

"But the love of fighting, of adventure, is natural to man?" "To uncivilized man, yes." "Strip a man," she cried, with a touch of scorn, "of the rags we call manners, take from him the defence which he pays to the opinion of society, and what do you find?"

"Sometimes a beast." "Ah!" She drew in her breath with a pretty sigh. "Sometimes a god." "Does he teach small boys?" she asked, demurely. "Confess, now, Mr. Livingston, you are something of a fraud. You ought to be fighting with your pen, I mean; playing monsters, like Hercules; and instead you are attempting to be a philosopher."

"I don't believe it." "Wretch! You have laid your finger upon a tender spot. Yes, I am fond of excitement. The deadly dullness of my life till—till quite lately has driven me nearly crazy. I have the dramatic instinct strong in me. Heaven knows where I get it, but I can't be rid of it. And my dramatic instinct tells me that there is some mystery here, in this peaceful home, where you would least expect it; and you, Mr. Livingston, are mixed up with this mystery. These, it's out at last."

"Poor child, how I pitied her!" "Miss Nancy," I said, earnestly, "the wine old Greek had a word which we translate wrongly, bitter-sweet. It should be sweet-bitter, for the bitterness comes last and remains. If you could realize how sweet and fragrant your present life is, you would be thankful content. This is really satisfactory. If you only knew it, but the beauty of it will never come home to you till you have left it."

"Do you mean," she said, slowly, "that the gratification of my curiosity may drive from Eden? Very well; I take the hint." "At the end of the month Mrs. Gerard requested a private interview. Her face, I remarked, wore a troubled expression, and she twisted her slender fingers, a sure sign of nervousness."

"I perceive," she began, softly, "that you are exploring a new country, Mr. Livingston. The French call it 'le pays du tendre.'" "I was completely taken aback. I am not a man who wears his heart upon his sleeve, and I had taken infinite pains to keep that unruly organ out of sight."

"Your silence," she continued, "confirms my fears. Let me entreat you to turn back before it is too late." "Turn back!" I ejaculated. "Mrs. Gerard, this is no walking tour. I am travelling by express."

"It is better to crawl," I replied; "but who a man is travelling fifty miles an hour it is dangerous to see the train. 'But you must leave the train—at once.' 'And break my neck—my heart I mean.' 'Hearts do not break,' she murmured; 'at least not the hearts of men.'"

"No, no; but Nancy is not, as you say, your father, the daughter of Mr. Gerard. Her father—the last words were almost inaudible—'the Edger Bunting.'" "I must have been blind not to have discovered this fact for myself. How much it accounted for, physically and intellectually; from him she inherited those brilliant eyes; from him, the power of speech, the 'toyrens' dialect copied into the novel."

"I love her," I whispered. "For herself, first, and, secondly, because she is your daughter." "Nancy," said Mrs. Gerard, in frozen tones, "can never marry. I have given her an education that is given to few girls. She has abundant material for happiness outside of marriage; and besides, she is so often a failure. Her books, her music, her absorbing interest in humanity, these must fill her life."

"Why, why?" "Her father," she said, with a faint smile, "was a man of great refinement and taste. He was a quality in it conspicuously absent from the terror of Mark Gerard. This was no coward sentiment. The awful dread of the father, as you know, is a dangerous man; the taint of insanity is in poor Nancy's veins."

"I don't care a rap," I answered. "I love her." "Mr. Livingston, do you force me to tell the truth to Nancy?" "You could not be so cruel; and, besides, I—I have no reason to suppose that she returns my love. I have taken no advantage of my position. I have—"

"You must leave the cottage to-morrow." "Leave?" I stammered. The word stuck in my throat. "We were sitting in the parlor. Mrs. Gerard, feeling that further conversation was intolerable, rose from her chair and walked slowly from the room. Through the window I caught a glimpse of her graceful figure as she paced the garden path. Was Nancy destined to fit from my life like some such abrupt fashion? Not while I, Hugo Livingston, had life and limbs to pursue. I waited a couple of minutes, choking my emotion, then I followed. I found her at the end of the walk, where a flight of steps led to the sands. She stood shading her eyes from the setting sun, her glance straying southward. I noted, in the mid-distance, a man walking rapidly, probably Demetrios, for he was tall and well proportioned. Strangers frequently passed the house (the sands at low tide were a public highway); and I wondered vaguely what possible interest this pedestrian challenged. Mrs. Gerard ignored me entirely. She stared directly at the approaching man."

"I touched her arm." "Mrs. Gerard, I pity you profoundly; but if I am willing to take the chance, it is—"

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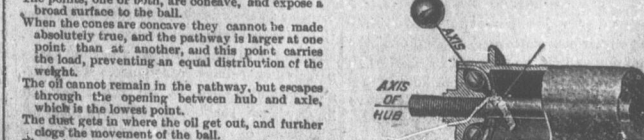
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