



AN AFRICAN MILLIONAIRE.

EPISODES IN THE LIFE OF THE ILLUSTRIOUS COLONEL CLAY.

BY GRANT ALLEN.

(Continued from page 357.)

It was capitally done. We arranged the thing to perfection. We had a constable in waiting in our rooms at the Metropole, and we settled that Dr. Polperro was to call at the hotel at a certain fixed hour to sign the warrant and receive his money. A regular agreement on sound stamped paper was drawn out between us. At the appointed time the "party of the first part" came, having already given us over possession of the portrait. Charles drew a cheque for the amount agreed upon, and signed it. Then he handed it to the Doctor. Polperro just clutched at it. Meanwhile, I took up my post by the door, while two men in plain clothes, detectives from the police station, stood as men-servants and watched the windows. We feared lest the impostor, once he had got the cheque, should dodge us somehow, as he had already done at Nice and in Paris. The moment he had pocketed his money with a smile of triumph, I advanced to him rapidly. I had in my possession a pair of handcuffs. Before he knew what was happening, I had slipped them on his wrists and secured them dexterously, while the constable stepped forward. "We have got you this time!" I cried. "We know who you are, Dr. Polperro. You are—Colonel Clay, alias Señor Antonio Herrera, alias the Reverend Richard Peplow Brabazon."

I never saw any man so astonished in my life. He was utterly flabbergasted. Charles thought he must have expected to get clear away at once, and that this prompt action on our part had taken the fellow so much by surprise as to simply unman him. He gazed about him as if he hardly realized what was happening.

"Are these two raving maniacs?" he asked at last, "or what do they mean by this nonsensical gibberish about Antonio Herrera?"

The constable laid his hand on the prisoner's shoulder. "It's all right, my man," he said. "We've got warrants out against you. I arrest you, Edward Polperro, alias the Reverend Richard Peplow Brabazon, on a charge of obtaining money under false pretences from Sir Charles Vandrift, K. C. M. G. M. P., on his sworn information, now here subscribed to." For Charles had had the thing drawn out in readiness beforehand.

Our prisoner drew himself up. "Look here, officer," he said, in an offended tone, "there's some mistake here in this matter. I have never given an alias at any time in my life. How do you know this is really Sir Charles Vandrift? It may be a case of bullying impersonation. My belief is, though, they're a pair of escaped lunatics."

"Well, see about that to-morrow," the constable said, collaring him. "At present you've got to go off with me quietly to the station, where these gentlemen will enter up the charge against you."

They carried him off, protesting. Charles and I signed the charge sheet; and the officer locked him up to await his examination next day before the magistrate.

Next morning, when we reached the court, an inspector met us with a very long face. "Look here, gentlemen," he said, "I'm afraid you've committed a very serious blunder. You've made a precious bad mess of it. You've got yourselves into a scrape; and, what's worse, you've got us into one also. You were a deal too smart with your sworn information. We've made inquiries about this gentleman, and we find the account he gives of himself is perfectly correct. His name is Polperro; he's a well-known art critic and collector of pictures, employed abroad by the National Gallery. He was formerly an official in the South Kensington Museum, and he's a B. and LL. D., very highly respected. And you've made a sad mistake, that's where it is; and you'll probably have to answer a charge of false imprisonment, in which I'm afraid you have also involved our own department."

Charles gasped with horror. "You haven't let him out," he cried, "on those absurd representations? You haven't let him slip through your hands as you did that murderer fellow?" "Let him slip through our hands?" the inspector cried. "I only wish he would. There's no chance of that, unfortunately. He's in the court there this moment, breathing out fire and slaughter against you both; and we're here to protect you if he should happen to fall upon you."

"If you haven't let him go I'm satisfied," Charles answered. "He's a fox for cunning. Where is he? Let me see him." We went into the court. There we saw our prisoner conversing amicably, in the most excited way, with the magistrate (who, it seems, was a personal friend of his); and Charles at once went up and spoke to them. Dr. Polperro turned round and glared at him through his pince-nez.

"The only possible explanation of this person's extraordinary and incredible conduct," he said, "is that he must be mad—and his secretary equally so. I demand a summons for false imprisonment."

Suddenly it began to dawn upon us that the tables were turned. By degrees it came out that we had made a mistake. Dr. Polperro was really the person he represented himself to be, and had been always. His picture, we found out, was the real Maria Vanrenen, and a genuine Rembrandt, which he had merely deposited for cleaning and restoring at the suspicious dealer's. Sir J. H. Tomlinson had been imposed upon and cheated by a cunning Dutchman; his picture, though also an undoubted Rembrandt, was not the Maria, and was an inferior specimen in bad preservation. The authority we had consulted turned out to be an ignorant, self-sufficient quack. The Maria, moreover, was valued by other experts at no more than five or six thousand guineas. Charles wanted to cry off his bargain, but Dr. Polperro naturally wouldn't hear of it. The agreement was a legally binding instrument, and what passed in Charles' mind at the moment had nothing to do with the written contract. Our adversary only consented to forego the action for false imprisonment on condition that Charles inserted a printed apology in the *Times* and paid him five hundred pounds compensation for damage to character.

Dr. Polperro, who was a familiar person in literary and artistic society, as it turned out, brought an action against the so-called expert who had declared against the genuineness of his alleged Rembrandt, and convicted him of the grossest ignorance and misstatement. Then paragraph got about. The *World* showed us up in a sarcastic article, and a week or two later my brother-in-law received a cheerful little note on scented paper from our persistent sharper. It was couched in these terms:

"Oh, you innocent infant! And did it believe, then, it had positively caught the redoubtable colonel? And had it ready a nice little pinch of salt to put upon his tail? And is it true its respected name is Sir Simple Simon? How heartily we have laughed, White Heather and I, at your neat

little ruses! It would pay you, by the way, to take White Heather into your house for six months to instruct you in the agreeable sport of amateur detectives. Your charming naïveté quite moves our envy. When again shall such infantile transparency be mine? When, ah, when? But never mind, dear friend. Though you didn't catch me, we shall meet before long at some delightful Philippi."

Yours, with the profoundest respect and gratitude,

ANTONIO HERRERA.

"Otherwise RICHARD PEPLOR BRABAZON."

Charles laid down the letter with a deep-drawn sigh. "Sey, my boy," he mused aloud, "no fortune on earth—not even mine—can go on standing it. These perpetual drains begin really to terrify me. I foresee the end. I shall die in a workhouse. What with the money he robs me of when he is Colonel Clay, and the money I waste upon him when he isn't Colonel Clay, the man is beginning to tell upon my nervous system."

"You must need rest and change," I said, "when you talk like that. Let us try the Tyrol."

IV.

THE EPISODE OF THE TYROLEAN CASTLE.

We went to Meran. The place was practically decided for us by Amelia's French maid, who really acts on such occasions as our guide and courier.

She is such a clever girl, is Amelia's French maid. Whenever we are going anywhere, Amelia generally asks (and accepts) her advice as to choice of hotels and furnished villas. Cesarine has been all over the Continent in her time; and being Alsatian by birth, she of course speaks German as well as she speaks French, while her long residence with Amelia has made her at last almost equally at home in our native English. She is a treasure, that girl—so neat and dexterous, and not above dabbling in anything on earth she may be asked to turn her hand to.

So when Amelia said, in her imperious way, "Cesarine, we want to go to the Tyrol—now—at once—in mid-October; where do you advise us to put up?" Cesarine answered, like a shot, "Herzog Johann, of course, at Meran, for the autumn, madame."

So to Meran we went; and a prettier or more picturesque place, I confess, I have seldom set eyes on. A rushing torrent; high hills and mountain peaks; a Rhine town plumped down among green Alpine heights, and threaded by the cool colonnades of Italy.

I approved Cesarine's choice; and I was particularly glad she had pronounced for an hotel, where all is plain sailing, instead of advising a furnished villa, the arrangements for which would naturally have fallen in large part upon the shoulders of the wretched secretary.

The great peculiarity of Meran is the number of Schlosses (I believe my plural is strictly irregular, but very convenient to English ears) which you can see in every direction from its outskirts. One would be square, with funny little turrets stuck out at each angle, while another would rejoice in a big round keep, and spread on either side long, ivy-clad walls and delightful bastions. Charles was immensely taken with them. From the moment he came he felt at once he would love to possess a castle of his own among those romantic mountains. "Seldon!" he exclaimed, contemptuously. "They call Seldon a castle! But you and I know very well, Sey, it was built in 1890, with sham antique stones, for Macpherson of Seldon, at market rates, by Cubitt and Co., worshipful contractors of London. Now, these castles are real. They are hoary with antiquity. Schloss Tyrol is Romanesque—tenth or eleventh century. (He had been reading it up in *Ætæder*.) That's the sort of place for me!—tenth or eleventh century."

As for Amelia, strange to say, she was equally taken with this new fad of Charles'. As a rule she hates everywhere on earth save London, except during the time when no respectable person can be seen in town, and when modest blinds shade the scandalized face of Mayfair and Belgravia. She set Cesarine to inquire of the people at the hotel about the market price of tumbledown ruins, and the number of such eligible family mausoleums just then for sale in the immediate neighborhood. Cesarine returned with a full, true and particular list. Several of them had witnessed the gorgeous marriages of Holy Roman Emperors, and every one of them was provided with some choice and selected first-class murders. Ghosts could be arranged for or not, as desired; and armorial bearings could be thrown in with the moat for a moderate extra remuneration.

The two we liked best of all these tempting piles were Schloss Planta and Schloss Lehenstein. Schloss Planta was the most striking externally, I should say, with its Rhine towers and its great gabled roof, and it looked as if they antedated the House of Hapsburg; but Lehenstein was said to be better preserved within, and more fitted in every way for modern occupation. Its staircase has been photographed by 7,000 amateurs.

We got tickets to view. The invaluable Cesarine procured them for us. Armed with these we drove off one fine afternoon, meaning to go to Planta, by Cesarine's recommendation. Half way there, however, we changed our minds, as it was such a lovely day, and went up the long, slow hill to Lehenstein. I must say the drive through the grounds was simply charming.

We knocked at the door—for there was really no bell, but a ponderous, old-fashioned, wrought-iron knocker.

The door was opened for us by a high well-born man, attired in a very ancient and honorable livery. Nice antique hall; suits of ancestral armor, trophies of Tyrolean hunters, coats of arms of ancient counts—the very thing to take Amelia's aristocratic and romantic fancy. The whole to be sold exactly as it stood; ancestors to be included at a valuation. We went through the reception-rooms. They were lofty, charming, and with glorious views, all the more glorious for being framed by those graceful Romanesque windows, with their slender pillars and quaint, round-topped arches. Sir Charles had made his mind up. "I must and will have it!" he cried. "This is the place for me. Seldon! Pah, Seldon is a modern abomination!"

Could we see the high well-born Count? The liveried servant (somewhat haughtily) would inquire of his Serenity. Sir Charles sent up his card, and also Lady Vandrift's. These foreigners know little spells money in England.

He was right in his surmise. Two minutes later the Count entered, with our cards in his hands. A good-looking young man, with the characteristic Tyrolean long black moustache, dressed in a gentlemanly variant on the costume of the country.

He waved us to seats. We sat down. He spoke to us in French; his English, he remarked, with a pleasant smile, being a negligible quantity. We might speak it, he went on—he could understand pretty well—but he preferred to answer, if we would allow him, in French or German.

"French," Charles replied, and the negotiation continued henceforth in that language. It is the only one, save English and his ancestral Dutch, with which my brother-in-law possesses even a nodding acquaintance.

We praised the beautiful scene. The Count's face lighted up with patriotic pride. Yes, it was beautiful, beautiful, his own green Tyrol. He was proud of it and attached to it.

Then they got to business. His manners were perfect. While we were talking to him, a surly person—a steward or bailiff, or something of the sort—came into the room unexpectedly and addressed him in German, which none of us understood. We were impressed by the singular urbanity and benignity of the nobleman's demeanor towards this sullen dependant. He evidently explained to the fellow what sort of people we were, and remonstrated with him in a very gentle way for interrupting us. The steward understood, and clearly regretted rupting us. The steward afterwards went out, and as he did so he bowed and made protestations of polite regard in his own language. The Count turned to us and smiled. "Our people," he said, "are like your own Scotch peasants—kind-hearted, picturesque, free, musical, poetic, but wanting, *hélas*, in polish to strangers."

He named his price in frank terms. His lawyers at Meran

held the needful documents, and would arrange the negotiations in detail with us. It was a stiff sum, I must say—an extremely stiff sum, but no doubt he was charging us a fancy price for a fancy castle.

I may add that people always imagine it must be easier to squeeze money out of millionaires than out of other people, which is the reverse of the truth, or how could they ever have amassed their millions? Instead of coining out gold as a tree oozes gum, they mop it up like blotting paper, and seldom give it out again.

We drove back from this first interview none the less very well satisfied. The price was too high, but preliminaries were arranged, and for the rest the Count desired us to discuss all details with his lawyers in the chief street, Unter den Lauben. We inquired about these lawyers, and found they were most respectable and respected men. They had done the family business on either side for seven generations.

They showed us plans and title deeds. Everything quite *en règle*. Till we came to the price there was no hitch of any sort.

As to price, however, the lawyers were obdurate. They stuck out for the Count's first sum to the uttermost florin. It was a very big estimate. We talked and shilly-shallied till Sir Charles grew angry. He lost his temper at last.

"They know I'm a millionaire, Sey," he said, "and they're playing the old game of trying to diddle me. But I won't be diddled. Except Colonel Clay, no man has ever yet succeeded in bleeding me. And shall I let myself be bled as if I were a chamois among these innocent mountains? Perish the thought!"

Things dragged on in this way, inconclusively, for a week or two. We bid down; the lawyers stuck to it. Sir Charles grew half sick of the whole silly business. For my own part, I felt sure if the high well-born Count didn't quicken his pace my respected relative would shortly have had enough of the Tyrol altogether, and be proof against the most lovely of crow-crowning castles. But the Count didn't see it. He came to call on us at our hotel (a rare honor for a stranger with these haughty and exclusive Tyrolean nobles, and even entered unannounced, in the most friendly manner. But when it came to £s. d. he was absolute adamant. Not one kreutzer would he abate from his original proposal.

"You misunderstand," he said, with pride. "We Tyrolean gentlemen are not shopkeepers or merchants. Were you, an Austrian, I should feel insulted by your ill-advised attempt to beat down my price. But as you belong to a great commercial nation—" he broke off with a snort, and shrugged his shoulders compassionately.

We saw him several times driving in and out of the schloss, and every time he waved his hand at us gracefully. But when we tried to bargain it was always the same thing—he retired behind the shelter of his Tyrolean nobility.

At last Charles gave up the attempt in disgust. He was tiring, as I expected. "It's the prettiest place I ever saw in my life," he said, "but, hang it all, Sey, I won't be imposed upon."

So he made up his mind, it being now December, to return to London. We met the Count next day, and stopped his carriage, and told him so. Charles thought this would have the immediate effect of bringing the man to reason. But he only lifted his hat, with the blackcock's feather, and smiled a bland smile. The Archduke Karl is inquiring about it," he answered, and drove on without parley.

Charles used some strong words, which I will not transcribe (I am a family man), and returned to England.

For the next two months we heard little from Amelia save her regret that the Count wouldn't sell the Schloss Lehenstein. Strange to say, she was absolutely infatuated about the castle. Moreover, Cesarine further inflamed her desire by gently hinting a fact which she had picked up at the courier's table d'hôte at the hotel, that the Count had been far from anxious to sell his ancestral and historical estate to a South African diamond king.

One morning in February, however, Amelia returned from the Row all smiles and tremors. (She had been ordered horse exercise to correct the increasing excessiveness of her figure.)

"Who do you think I saw riding in the Park?" she inquired. "Why, the Count of Lehenstein."

"No!" Charles exclaimed, incredulous. "Yes," Amelia answered. "Must be mistaken," Charles cried.

But Amelia stuck to it. More than that, she sent out emissaries to inquire diligently from the London lawyers whose name had been mentioned to us by the ancestral firm in Unter den Lauben as their English agents as to the whereabouts of our friend, and her emissaries learned in effect that the Count was in town and stopping at Morley's.

I was all for waiting prudently till the Count made the first move, but Amelia's ardor could not now be restrained. She insisted that Charles should call on the Graf as a mere return of his politeness in the Tyrol.

He was as charming as ever. He would be ravished to dine next evening with Sir Charles.

He dined with us, almost *en famille*. In the billiard-room, about midnight, Charles reopened the subject. The Count was really touched. It pleased him that still, amid the distractions of the City of Five Million Souls, we should remember with affection his beloved Lehenstein.

"Come to my lawyers," he said, "to-morrow, and I will talk it all over with you."

We went—a most respectable firm in Southampton Row; old family solicitors. They had done business for years for the late Count, who had inherited from his grandmother estates in Ireland, and they were glad to be honored with the confidence of his successor.

Sir Charles named a price, and referred them to his solicitors. The Count named a higher, but still a little come-down, and left the matter to be settled between the lawyers. He was a soldier and a gentleman, he said, with a Tyrolean loss of his high-born head. He would abandon details to men of business.

I met the Count accidentally next day on the steps of Morley's. (Accidentally, that is to say, so far as he was concerned.) I explained, in guarded terms, that I had a great deal of influence in my way with Sir Charles, and that a word from me—I broke off. He stared at me blankly.

"Commission?" he inquired at last, with a queer little smile.

"Well, not exactly commission," I answered, wincing. "Still, a friendly word, you know. One good turn deserves another."

He looked at me from head to foot with a curious kind of scrutiny. For one moment I feared the Tyrolean nobleman in him was going to raise its foot and take active measures.

"M. Ventworth," he said, "I am a Tyrolean *seigneur*; I do not dabble, myself, in commissions and percentages. But if your influence with Sir Charles—we understand each other, do we not?—between gentlemen—a little friendly present—no money, of course—but the equivalent of say five per cent. in jewelry on whatever sum above his bid to-day you induce him to offer—eh?—*c'est convenu*?"

"Ten per cent. is more usual," I murmured.

He was the Austrian hussar again. "Five, monsieur, or nothing!"

I bowed and withdrew. "Well, five, then," I answered, "just to oblige your Serenity."

When it came to the scratch, I had but little difficulty in persuading Sir Charles, with Amelia's aid, to accede to the Count's more reasonable proposal. In a week or two all was settled. Charles and I met the Count by appointment in Southampton Row, and saw him sign, seal and deliver the title deeds of Schloss Lehenstein. My brother-in-law paid the purchase money into the Count's own hands, by cheque, crossed on a first-class London firm where the Count kept an account to his high well-born order. And, what to me was more important still, received next morning by post a cheque for the five per cent., unfortunately drawn, by some misapprehension, to my order on the selfsame bankers, and with the Count's signature.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]