



AN AFRICAN MILLIONAIRE.

EPISODES IN THE LIFE OF THE ILLUSTRIOUS COLONEL CLAY.

BY GRANT ALLEN.

(Continued from page 383.)

I cashed the cheque at once, and said nothing about the affair, not even to Isabel. My experience is that women are not to be trusted with intricate matters of commission and brokerage.

Charles insisted that we must all run over at once to take possession of our magnificent Tyrolean castle. We took the Orient Express as far as Munich, then the Brenner to Meran, and put up for the night at the Erzherzog Johann. Though we had telegraphed our arrival, and expected some fuss, there was no demonstration. Next morning we drove out in state to the schloss, to enter into enjoyment of our vines and fig trees.

We were met at the door by the surly steward. "I shall dismiss that man," Charles muttered, as Lord of Lebenstein. "He's too sour-looking for my taste. Never saw such a brute. Not a smile of welcome!"

He mounted the steps. The surly man stepped forward and murmured a few morose words in German. Charles brushed him aside and strode on. Then there followed a curious scene of mutual misunderstanding. The surly man called lustily for his servants to eject us. It was some time before we began to catch at the truth. The surly man was the real Graf von Lebenstein.

And the Count with the moustache? It dawned upon us now. Colonel Clay again! More audacious than ever! Bit by bit it all came out. He had ridden behind us the first day we viewed the place, and, giving himself out to the servants as one of our party, had joined us in the reception room. We asked the real Count why he had spoken to the intruder. The Count explained in French that the man with the moustache had introduced my brother-in-law as the great South African millionaire, while he described himself as our courier and interpreter. As such he had had frequent interviews with the real Graf and his lawyers in Meran, and had driven almost daily across to the castle. The owner of the estate had named one price from the first, and had stuck to it manfully. He stuck to it still; and if Sir Charles chose to buy Schloss Lebenstein over again he was welcome to have it. How the London lawyers had been duped the Count had not really the slightest idea. He regretted the incident, and (coldly) wished us a very good morning.

Charles and I ran across post-haste to England to track down the villain. At Southampton Row we found the legal firm by no means penitent; on the contrary, they were indignant at the way we had deceived them. An impostor had written to them on Lebenstein paper from Meran to say that he was coming to London to negotiate the sale of the schloss and surrounding property with the famous millionaire, Sir Charles Vandrift; and Sir Charles had demonstratively recognized him at sight as the real Count von Lebenstein. The firm had never seen the present Graf at all, and had swallowed the impostor whole, so to speak, on the strength of Sir Charles' obvious recognition. He had brought over as documents some most excellent forgeries—facsimiles of the originals—which as our courier and interpreter, he had every opportunity of examining and inspecting at the Meran lawyers'.

By the evening's post two letters arrived: one for myself and one for my employer. Sir Charles' last thus:

"HIGH WELL-BORN INCOMPETENCE,—

"I only just pulled through! A very small slip nearly lost me everything. I believed you were going to Schloss Planta that day, not to Schloss Lebenstein. You changed your mind en route. That might have spoiled all. Happily I perceived it, rode up by the short cut, and arrived somewhat hurriedly and hotly at the gate before you. The rival claimant to my name and title intruded into the room. But fortune favors the brave—your utter ignorance of German saved me. The rest was pain. It went by itself, almost.

"Allow me now, as some small return for your various welcome cheques, to offer you a useful and valuable present—a German dictionary, grammar, and phrase book!

"I kiss your hand.

"No longer

"VON LEBENSTEIN."

The other note was to me. It was as follows:

"DEAR GOOD MR. VENTWORTH,—

"The Lord has delivered you into my hands, dear friend—on your own initiative. I hold my cheque, endorsed by you, and cashed at my banker's, as a hostage, so to speak, for your future good behavior. If ever you recognize me, and betray me to that solemn old ass, your employer, remember, I expose it, and you with it, to him. So now we understand each other. Your mouth is now closed. And cheap, too, at the price. Yours, dear comrade, in the great confraternity of rogues,—

"CUTHBERT CLAY, Colonel."

Charles laid his note down, and grizzled. "What's yours, Sey?" he asked.

"From a lady," I answered. "Oh, I thought it was the same hand," he said.

He paused a moment. "You made all inquiries at this fellow's bank?" he went on, after a deep sigh.

"Oh yes!" I put in quickly. "They say the self-styled Count von Lebenstein was introduced to them by the Southampton Row folks, and drew, as usual, on the Lebenstein account; so they were quite unsuspecting. The bank didn't even require to have him formally identified. The firm was enough. He came to pay money in, not to draw it out. And he withdrew his balance just two days later, saying he was in a hurry to get back to Vienna."

Charles leaned back in his easy-chair, stuck his hands in his pockets, held his legs straight out on the fender before him, and looked the very picture of hopeless despondency.

"Sey," he began, after a minute or two, poking the fire reflectively, "what a genius that man has! 'Pon my soul, I admire him. I sometimes wish—"

"Yes, Charles?" I answered. "I sometimes wish—"

"I sometimes wish—"

"I sometimes wish—"

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out from London, and at dawn on the twelfth he must be at work on his moors, with all the guns in the house to help him, till the keepers warn him he has killed as many grouse as they consider desirable; and then he retires precipitately, with flying colors, to Brighton, Nice, Monte Carlo or elsewhere.

Sir Charles, I ought to say, had secured during that summer a very advantageous option in a part of Africa on the Transvaal frontier, rumored to be auriferous. Now, whether it was auriferous or not before, the mere fact that Charles had secured some claim on it naturally made it so, for whatever he handles turns at once to gold, if not to diamonds. Therefore his great rival in that region, Lord Craig-Ellachie (formerly Sir David Alexander Granton), immediately secured a similar option of an adjacent tract, the larger part of which had pretty much the same geological conditions as that covered by Sir Charles' right of pre-emption.

We were not wholly disappointed, as it turned out, in the result. A month or two later, while we were still at Seldon, we received a long and encouraging letter from our prospectors on the spot, who had been hunting over the ground in search of gold reefs. They reported that they had found a good auriferous vein in a corner of the tract, approachable by adit-levels, but, unfortunately, only a few yards of the lode lay within the limits of Sir Charles' area. The remainder ran on at once into what was locally known as Craig-Ellachie's section.

However, our prospectors had been canny, they said; though young Mr. Granton was prospecting at the same time, in the self-same ridge, not very far from them, his miners had failed to discover the auriferous quartz, so our men had held their tongues about it, wisely leaving it for Charles to govern himself accordingly.

"Can you dispute the boundary?" I asked.

"Impossible," Charles answered. "You see, the limit is a meridian of longitude. There's no getting over that. We've only one way out of it, Sey. Amalgamate! Amalgamate!"

"Capital!" I answered. "Say nothing about it, and join forces with Craig-Ellachie."

That very same evening came a telegram in cipher from our chief engineer on the territory of the option: "Young Granton has somehow given us the slip and gone home. We suspect he knows all. But we have not divulged the secret to anybody."

"Seymour," my brother-in-law said, impressively, "there is no time to be lost. I must write this evening to Sir David—I mean to My Lord."

We adjourned into the study, where Sir Charles drafted, I must admit, a most judicious letter to the rival capitalist. He pointed out that the mineral resources of the country were probably great, but as yet uncertain. That the expense of crushing and milling might be almost prohibitive. That water was scarce, and commanded by our section. That two rival companies, if they happened to hit upon ore, might cut one another's throats by erecting two sets of furnaces or pumping plants, and bringing two separate streams to the spot, where one would answer. In short (to employ the golden word), that amalgamation might prove better in the end than competition; and that he advised, at least, a conference on the subject.

"This is important, Sey," he said. "It had better be registered, for fear of falling into improper hands. Don't give it to Dobson; let Cesarine take it over to Fowls in the dog-cart."

Cesarine took it as directed—an invaluable servant, that girl! Meanwhile we learned from the *Morning Post* next day that young Mr. Granton had arrived from Africa by the same at Glen-Ellachie, and had joined his father at once.

Two days later we received a most polite reply from the opposing interest. It ran after this fashion:

"Craig-Ellachie Lodge,

"Glen-Ellachie, Inverness-shire.

"DEAR SIR CHARLES VANDRIFT,—Thanks for yours of the 20th. In reply I can only say I fully reciprocate your amiable desire that nothing adverse to either of our companies should happen in South Africa. With regard to your suggestion that we should meet in person to discuss the basis of a possible amalgamation, I can only say my house is at present full of guests (as is doubtless your own, Glen-Ellachie). Fortunately, however, my son David is now at home on a brief holiday from Kimberley; and it will give him great pleasure to come over and hear what you have to say in favor of an arrangement which certainly, on some grounds, seems to me will arrive to-morrow afternoon at Seldon, and he is authorized, in every respect, to negotiate with full powers on behalf of myself and the other directors. With kindest regards to your wife and sons, I remain, dear Sir Charles, yours faithfully,—

"What a nuisance!" Amelia cried, when we told her of the incident. "I suppose I shall have to put the man up for the night—a nasty, raw-boned, half-baked Scotchman, you may be certain."

On Wednesday afternoon, about three, young Granton arrived. He was a pleasant-looking, red-haired, sandy-whiskered youth, not unlike his father; but, strange to say, he dropped in to us, instead of bringing his luggage.

"Why, you're not going back to Glen-Ellachie to-night, surely?" Charles exclaimed in amazement. "Lady Vandrift will be so disappointed! Besides, this business can't be arranged between two trains, do you think, Mr. Granton?"

Young Granton smiled. He had an agreeable smile—canny, yet open.

"Oh no!" he said frankly. "I didn't mean to go back. I've put up at the inn. I have my wife with me, you know—and, I wasn't invited."

Amelia was of opinion, when we told her this episode, that David Granton wouldn't stop at Seldon because he was an Honorable.

However that may be, young Granton insisted on remaining at the Cronarty Arms, though he told us his wife would be delighted to receive a call from Lady Vandrift and Mrs. Wentworth. So we all returned with him to bring the Honorable Mrs. Granton up to tea at the Castle.

She was a nice little thing, very shy and timid, but by no means unrepresentative, and an evident lady. She giggled at the end of every sentence, and she was endowed with a slight squint, which somehow seemed to point all her feeble sallies.

Next morning Charles and I had a regular debate with young Granton about the rival options. Gradually and gracefully he let us see that Lord Craig-Ellachie had sent him the benefit of the company, but that he had come for the benefit of the Honorable David Granton.

"I'm a younger son, Sir Charles," he said, "and therefore guided implicitly by what I advise in the matter. Now, let's be businesslike. You want to amalgamate. You wouldn't do that, of course, if you didn't know of something to the advantage of my father's company—say a lode on our land—which choose to render it worth my while, I'll induce my father and long and the short of it!"

Charles looked at him admiringly.

"Young man," he said, "you're deep, very deep—for your age. Is this candor—or deception? Do you mean what you say?"

Young Granton smiled again. "You're a financier, Sir Charles," he answered. "I wonder, at your time of life, you fill his own pocket—or his father's. Whatever is my father's?"

"You are right as to general principles," Sir Charles replied, quite affectionately. "But how do I know you haven't bargained already in the same way with your father?"

The young man assumed a most candid air. "Look here," he said, leaning forward. "I offer you this chance. Take it

or leave it. Do you wish to purchase my aid for this amalgamation by a moderate commission on the net value of my father's option to yourself—which I know approximately?"

"Say five per cent.," I suggested, in a tentative voice, just to justify my presence.

He looked me through and through. "Ten is more usual," he answered, in a peculiar tone and with a peculiar glance.

Great heavens, how I winced! They were the very words I had said myself to Colonel Clay, as the Count von Lebenstein, about the purchase money of the schloss, and in the very same accent. My blood ran cold.

The interview was long. I hardly know how I struggled through it. At the end young Granton went off, well satisfied (if it was young Granton), and Amelia invited him and his wife up to dinner at the Castle.

Young Granton, it turned out, was a most agreeable person, and so, in her way, was that timid, unpretending South African wife of his. Moreover, the Honorable David was a splendid swimmer. He went out in a boat with us, and dived like a seal. He was burning to teach Charles and myself to swim when we told him we could neither of us take a single stroke; he said it was an accomplishment incumbent upon every true Englishman. But Charles hates the water; while as for myself, I detest every known form of muscular exercise.

However, we consented that he should row us on the Firth, and made an appointment one day with himself and his wife for four the next evening.

That night Charles came to me with a very grave face in my own bedroom. "Sey," he said, under his breath, "have you observed? Have you watched? Have you any suspicions? My own belief is—they're Colonel Clay and Madame Picardet."

I seized his arm. "Charles," I said, imploring him, "do nothing rash. Remember how you exposed yourself to the ridicule of fools over Dr. Polperro!"

"I've thought of that," he answered, "and I mean to call. First thing to-morrow I shall telegraph over to enquire at Glen-Ellachie; I shall find out whether this is really young Granton or not; meanwhile I shall keep my eye close upon the fellow."

I did not myself expect to see the reply arrive much before seven or eight that evening. Meanwhile, as it was far from certain we had not the real David Granton to deal with, it was necessary to be polite to our friendly rivals. Our experience in the Polperro incident had shown us both that too much zeal may be more dangerous than too little.

About four o'clock the red-haired young man and his pretty little wife came up to call for us. She tripped down to the Seldon boathouse, with Charles by her side, giggling and squinting her best, and then helped her husband to get the skiff ready. As she did so, Charles sidled up to me. "Sey," he whispered, "I'm an old hand, and I'm not readily taken in. I've been talking to that girl, and upon my soul I think she's all right."

We rowed out on to the Firth, or, to be more strictly correct, the two Grantons rowed, while Charles and I sat and leaned back in the stern on the luxurious cushions.

Mrs. Granton pulled stroke. Even as she rowed she kept up a brisk undercurrent of timid chaff with Sir Charles, giggling all the while, half forward, half shy, like a schoolgirl who flirts with a man old enough to be her grandfather.

Sir Charles was flattered. The wiles of women of the world he knows too well, but a pretty little ingenue can twist him round her finger. They rowed on, and on, till they drew abreast of Seamen's island. It is a jagged stack or skerry, well out to sea, very wild and precipitous on the landward side, but shelving gently outward; perhaps an acre in extent, with steep gray cliffs, covered at that time with crimson masses of red valerian. Mrs. Granton rowed up close to it.

"Oh, what lovely flowers!" she cried, throwing her head back and gazing at them. "I wish I could get some! Let's land here and pick them." Sir Charles, you shall gather me a nice bunch for my sitting-room."

Charles rose to it innocently, like a trout to a fly.

"By all means, my dear child, I—I have a passion for flowers." Which was a flower of speech itself, but it served its purpose.

They rowed us round to the far side, where is the easiest landing-place. Then young Granton jumped lightly ashore; Mrs. Granton skipped after him. I confess it made me feel rather ashamed to see how clumsily Charles and I followed them, treading gingerly on the thwarts for fear of upsetting the boat, while the artless young thing just flew over the gunwale. So like White Heather! However, we got ashore at last in safety, and began to climb the rocks as well as we were able in search of the valerian.

Judge of our astonishment when next moment those two young people bounded back into the boat, pushed off with a peal of merry laughter, and left us there staring at them!

They rowed away, about twenty yards, into deep water. Then the man turned, and waved his hand at us gracefully. "Good-bye!" he said. "Good-bye! Hope you'll pick a nice bunch! We're off to London!"

"Off!" Charles exclaimed, turning pale. "Off! What do you mean?"

The young man raised his cap with perfect politeness, while Mrs. Granton smiled, nodded, and kissed her pretty hand to us. "Yes," he answered, "for the present. We retire from the game. The fact of it is, it's a trifle too thin: this is a *coup manqué*.

"A *coup manqué*," Charles exclaimed, perspiring visibly.

"A *coup manqué*," the young man replied, with a compassionate smile. "A failure, don't you know; a bad shot; a fiasco. I learn from my scouts that you sent a telegram by special messenger to Lord Craig-Ellachie this morning. That shows you suspect me. Now, it is a principle of mine, I never to go on for one move with a game when I find myself suspected. I never try to bleed a man who struggles. So now we're off. Ta-ta! Good luck to you!"

He was not much more than twenty yards away, and could talk to us quite easily. But the water was deep; the islet rose sheer from I'm sure I don't know how many fathoms of sea; and we could neither of us swim. Charles stretched out his arms imploringly. "For Heaven's sake," he cried, "don't tell me you really mean to leave us here."

He looked so comical in his distress and terror that Mrs. Granton laughed melodiously in her prettiest way at the sight of him. "Dear Sir Charles," she called out, "pray don't be only need just time enough to get well ashore and make—oh!—a few slight alterations in our personal appearance." And she indicated with her hand, laughing, dear David's red wig and false sandy whiskers, as we felt convinced they must be now.

"Then you are Colonel Clay!" Sir Charles cried, mopping his brow with his handkerchief.

"If you choose to call me so," the young man answered, politely. "I'm sure it's most kind of you to supply me with a commission in Her Majesty's service. However, time presses, and we want to push off. Rest assured that you shall be rescued by midnight, at latest. Fortunately, the weather just at present is warm, and I see no chance of rain; so you will suffer, if at all, from nothing worse than the pangs of temporary hunger."

Charles was half beside himself, divided between alternate terror and anger. "Oh, what shall die here!" he exclaimed. "Nobody'd ever dream of coming to this rock to search for me."

"What a pity you didn't let me teach you to swim!" Colonel Clay interposed. "It is a noble exercise, and very useful indeed in such special emergencies! Well, ta-ta, I'm off! You nearly scored one this time, but by putting you here say I've redressed the board, and I think we may count it a drawn game, mayn't we? The match stands at three, love—with some thousands in pocket!"

[TO BE CONTINUED.]