



AN AFRICAN MILLIONAIRE.

EPISODES IN THE LIFE OF THE ILLUSTRIOUS COLONEL CLAY.

BY GRANT ALLEN.

(Continued from page 430.)

"You're a murderer, sir!" Charles shrieked out. "We shall starve or die here!"

Colonel Clay, on his side, was all sweet reasonableness. "Now, my dear sir," he expostulated, one hand held palm outward, "do you think it probable I would kill the goose that lays the golden eggs with so little compunction? No, no, Sir Charles Vandrift, I know too well how much you are worth to me. I return you on my income-tax paper as five thousand a year, clear profit of my profession. As a regular financier, I allow, I couldn't hold a candle to you, but in my humbler walk of life I know just how to utilize you. I lead you on where you think you are going to gain some advantage over others, and by dexterously playing upon your love of a good bargain—your innate desire to best somebody else—I succeed in besting you. There, sir, you have the philosophy of our mutual relations."

He bowed and raised his cap. Charles looked at him and covered. "And do you mean to say," he burst out, "you intend to go on so bleeding me?"

The Colonel smiled a bland smile. "Sir Charles Vandrift," he answered, "I called you just now the goose that lays the golden eggs. You may have thought the metaphor a rude one. But you are a goose, you know, in certain relations. Smartest man on the Stock Exchange, I readily admit; easiest fool to bamboozle in the open country that ever I met with. Regard me, my dear sir, as a microbe of millionaires, a parasite upon capitalists. I am a Robin Hood of my age, and, looking upon you as an exceptionally bad form of millionaire, as well as an exceptionally easy form of pigeon for a man of my type and talents to pluck, I have, so to speak, taken up my abode upon you."

"Why do you insult me by telling me all this?" Sir Charles cried, writhing.

The Colonel waved his hand. It was small and white. "Because I love the game," he answered, with a relish; "and also because the more prepared you are beforehand the greater credit and amusement is there in besting you. Well, now, ta-ta once more! I am wasting valuable time. I might be cheating somebody. I must be off at once. Take care of yourself, Wentworth. But I know you will. You always do. Ten per cent. is more usual!"

He rowed away and left us alone on the island. Charles flung himself on the bare rock in a wild access of despondency. As for myself, I climbed with some difficulty to the top of the cliff, landward, and tried to make signals of distress with my handkerchief to some passer-by on the mainland.

The evening came on slowly. Puffins and cormorants circled around our heads in the gray of twilight. Charles suggested that they might even swoop down upon us and bite us. They did not, however, but their flapping wings added, none the less, a painful touch of eeriness to our hunger and solitude.

About eleven o'clock we heard human voices. "Boat ahoy!" I shouted. An answering shout aroused us to action. We rushed down to the landing-place and cooed for the men, to show them where we were. They came up at once in Sir Charles' own boat. They were fishermen from Niggarey, on the shore of the Fifth opposite.

A lady and gentleman had sent them, they said, to return the boat and call for us on the island; their description corresponded to the two supposed Grantons. It was half-past twelve by the gatehouse clock when we reached the castle. Amelia had gone to bed, much alarmed for our safety. Isabel was sitting up. It was too late, of course, to do much that night in the way of apprehending the miscreants, though Charles insisted upon dispatching a groom, with a telegram for the police at Inverness, to Fowls.

Nothing came of it all. A message awaited us from Lord Craig-Ellachie, to be sure, saying that his son had not left Glen-Ellachie Lodge, while research the next day and later showed that our correspondent had never even received our letter. An empty envelope alone had arrived at the house, and the postal authorities had been engaged, meanwhile, with their usual lightning speed, in "investigating the matter." Cesarine had posted the letter herself at Fowls, and brought back the receipt, so the only conclusion we could draw was this—Colonel Clay must be in league with somebody at the post office. As for Lord Craig-Ellachie's reply, that was a simple forgery; though, oddly enough, it was written on Glen-Ellachie paper.

But the oddest part of it all was that from the moment those two people landed at Niggarey and told the fisherman there were some gentlemen stranded on Seamew's island, all trace of them vanished. At no station along the line could we gain any news of them. It was a most singular and insoluble mystery.

Charles lived in hopes of catching his man in London. But for my part, I felt there was a show of reason in one last taunt which the rascal flung back at us as the boat receded: "Sir Charles Vandrift, we are a pair of rogues. The law protects you. It persecutes me. That's all the difference."

VI.

THE EPISODE OF THE GERMAN PROFESSOR.

Charles does a little in gold, and a little in land, but his principal operations have always lain in the direction of diamonds. Only once in my life, indeed, have I seen him pay the slightest attention to poetry, and that was when I happened one day to recite the lines:

"Full many a gem of purest ray serene
The dark, unfathomed caves of ocean bear."

He rubbed his hands at once and murmured enthusiastically, "I never thought of that. We might get up an Atlantic Exploration Syndicate, Limited." So attached is he to diamonds. You may gather, therefore, what a shock it was to that gigantic brain to learn that science was rapidly reaching a point where his favorite gems might become all at once a mere drug in the market.

It happened after this manner.

We were strolling along Piccadilly when whom should we happen to knock up against but Sir Adolphus Cordery, the famous mineralogist and leading spirit of the Royal Society. "Halloa, Vandrift," he cried, in his peculiarly loud and piercing voice, "heard about this marvellous new discovery of Schleiermacher's? It's calculated to make you diamond kings squirm like an eel in a frying-pan."

I could see Charles wriggle inside his clothes.

"Please don't talk quite so loud! All London can hear you."

Sir Adolphus ran his arm through Charles' most amiably. "Come along with me to the Athenaeum," he went on, in the same stentorian voice, "and I'll tell you all about it. Most interesting discovery. Makes diamonds cheap as dirt. Calculated to supersede South Africa altogether."

Charles allowed himself to be dragged along. There was nothing else possible. Sir Adolphus continued that Professor Schleiermacher, of Jena, "the greatest living authority on the chemistry of gems," had lately invented, or claimed to have invented, a system for artificially producing diamonds, which had yielded most surprising and unexceptionable results.

Charles' lip curled slightly. "I've heard of it before. Very inferior stones, quite small and worthless, produced at immense cost, and even then not worth looking at."

Sir Adolphus produced a small cut gem from his pocket. "How's that for the first water?" he inquired, passing it across, with a broad smile, to the sceptic. "Made under my own eyes—and quite inexpensively."

Charles examined it close, stopping short against the railings in St. James' Square to look at it with his pocket lens. There was no denying the truth. It was a capital small gem of the finest quality.

"Made under your own eyes!" he exclaimed, still incredulous. "Where, my dear sir—at Jena?"

The answer was a thunderbolt from a blue sky. "No, here in London; last night as ever was; before myself and Dr. Gray; and about to be exhibited by the President himself at a meeting of Fellows of the Royal Society."

Charles drew a long breath. "This nonsense must be stopped," he said firmly. "It must be nipped in the bud."

How do you mean?" Cordery asked, astonished.

Charles gazed at him steadily. "Where is the fellow?" he asked.

Here in London," Sir Adolphus replied. "He's staying at my house, and he says he'll be glad to show his experiments to anybody scientifically interested in diamonds. We propose to have a demonstration of the process to-night at Lancaster Gate. Will you drop in and see it?"

Would he "drop in" and see it? "Drop in" at such a function! Could he possibly stay away? Charles clutched the enemy's arm with a nervous grip. "Look here, Cordery," he said, quivering; "this is a question affecting very important interests. Don't do anything rash. Don't do anything foolish. Remember that Shares may rise or fall on this."

"I should think it very probable," Sir Adolphus replied, with the callous indifference of the mere man of science to financial suffering.

Sir Charles was bland, but peremptory. "Now, observe," he said, "a grave responsibility rests on your shoulders. You must not ask in any number of outsiders to witness these experiments. I will come myself—I'm engaged to dine out, but I can contract an indisposition—and I should advise you to ask Mosenheimer, and, say, young Phipson. Above all, don't blab; for Heaven's sake let there be no premature gossip."

"We are keeping the matter a profound secret, at Schleiermacher's own request," Cordery answered, more seriously.

"Which is why," Charles said, in his severest tone, "you bawled it out at the very top of your voice in Piccadilly!"

However, before nightfall everything was arranged to Charles' satisfaction, and off we went to Lancaster Gate, with a profound expectation that the German professor would do nothing worth seeing.

He was a remarkable-looking man, once tall, I should say, from his long, thin build, but now bowed and bent with long devotion to study and leaning over a crucible. His hair, prematurely white, hung down upon his forehead, but his eye was keen and his mouth sagacious. He plunged at once into the thick of the matter, telling us briefly, in his equally thick accent, that he "now brobrosed by his new process to make for us some good and satisfactory diamonds."

He brought out his apparatus and explained—or, as he said, "eggsblained"—his novel method. "Diamonds," he said, "were nozzing but pure crystalline carbon. He knew how to crystallize it—zat was all ze secret. The men of science examined the pots and pans carefully. Then he put in a certain number of raw materials, and he was to work with ostentatious openness. There were three distinct processes, and he made two stones by each simultaneously. In three-quarters of an hour (and he smiled sardonically) he could produce a diamond worth, at current prices, two hundred pounds sterling. "As you shall now see me perform," he remarked, "viz zis simple abbaradus."

The materials fizzed and fumed. The Professor stirred them. After three-quarters of an hour the Professor, still smiling, began to empty the apparatus and removed a large quantity of dust or powder, which he succinctly described as "by-products," and then took between finger and thumb, from the midst of each pan, a small white pebble, not water-worn apparently, but slightly rough and wart-like on the surface.

They were handed round for inspection. Rough and uncut as they stood, it was, of course, impossible to judge of their value. But one thing was certain. The men of science had been watching close at the first, and were sure Herr Schleiermacher had not put the stones in; they were keen at the withdrawal, and were equally sure he had taken them honestly out of the pannikins.

"I will now distribute zem," the Professor remarked in a casual tone, as if diamonds were peas, looking round at the company. And he singled out my brother-in-law. "One to Sir Charles!" he said, handing it; "one to Mr. Mosenheimer; one to Mr. Phipson—as representing the diamond interest. Zen one each to Sir Adolphus, to Dr. Gray, to Mr. Fane-Fiffan, as representing science. You will haf zehm, cut and rebort upon zem in due gourse. We meet again at zis place ze day after do-morrow."

Charles walked homeward with the Professor. He sounded him gently as to the sum required, should need arise, to purchase his secrecy. Already Sir Adolphus had bound us all down to temporary silence—as if that were necessary—but Charles wished to know how much Schleiermacher would take to suppress his discovery. The German was immovable.

No, no! he replied, with positive petulance. "You do not understand. I do not buy and sell. Zis is a chemical fact. We must insist for the sake of off ze secretal false. I do not care for wealse. I haf no time to waste in making money."

On the appointed night Charles went back to Lancaster Gate, as I could not fail to remark, with a strange air of complete and painful preoccupation.

The diamonds were produced, with one surface of each slightly scored by the cutters, so as to show the water. Strange to say, each of the three diamonds given to the three diamond kings turned out to be a most inferior and valueless stone; while each of the three entrusted to the care of the scientific investigators turned out to be a fine gem of the purest quality.

I confess it was a sufficiently suspicious conjunction. The three representatives of the diamond interest gazed at each other with inquiring side-glances. Then their eyes fell suddenly; they avoided one another. Had each independently substituted a weak and inferior natural stone for Professor Schleiermacher's manufactured pebbles? It almost seemed so.

Then Sir Adolphus spoke—or rather, he orated. He said, in his loud and grating voice, we had that evening, and on a previous evening, been present at the conception and birth of an Epoch in the History of Science. Professor Schleiermacher was one of those men of whom his native Saxony might well be proud; while as a Briton he must say he regretted somewhat that this discovery, like so many others, should have been "Made in Germany." The Professor did not seek to make money out of his discovery. He rose above the sordid greed of capitalists. However, out of deference to the wishes of those financial gentlemen who were oddly concerned in maintaining the present price of the diamond interest, they had

arranged that the secret should be strictly guarded and kept for the present till he himself, and a small committee of the Royal Society, should have time to investigate and verify for themselves the Professor's beautiful and ingenious processes—an investigation and verification which the learned Professor himself both desired and suggested. (Schleiermacher nodded approval.) When that was done, if the process stood the test, further concealment would be absolutely futile. The price of diamonds must fall at once below that of paste, and any protest on the part of the financial world would, of course, be useless.

Everybody applauded. It was an awkward moment. Sir Charles bit his lip. Mosenheimer looked glum. Young Phipson dropped an expression which I will not transcribe. And after a solemn promise of deathlike secrecy the meeting separated.

I noticed that my brother-in-law somewhat ostentatiously avoided Mosenheimer at the door, and all the way to Mayfair he leaned back in his seat with close-set lips, never uttering a syllable.

Before he retired to rest, however, in the privacy of the billiard-room I ventured to ask him, "Charles, will you unload Golcondas to-morrow?"

He eyed me sternly. "Wentworth," he said, "you're a fool! Is it likely I would unload, and wreck the confidence of the public in the Cloetedorp Company, at such a moment? As a director—as Chairman—would it be just or right of me? I ask you, sir, could I reconcile it to my conscience?"

"Charles," I answered, "you are right. Your conduct is noble. You will not save your own personal interests at the expense of those who have put their trust in you."

At the same time I thought to myself, "I am not a director. Before the crash comes I will sell out to-morrow the few shares I hold, through Charles' kindness, in the Cloetedorp Golcondas."

With his marvellous business instinct Charles seemed to divine my thought, for he turned round to me sharply. "Look here, Sir," he remarked, in an acidulous tone, "recollect, you're my brother-in-law. You are also my secretary. The eyes of London will be upon us to-morrow. If you were to sell out, and operators got to know of it, they'd suspect there was something up, and the company would suffer for it. Of course, you can do what you like with your own property. I can't interfere with that. I do not dictate to you. But as Chairman of the Golcondas, I am bound to see that the interests of widows and orphans whose All is invested with me should not suffer at this crisis. Therefore I am bound to give you warning: If you sell out those shares of yours, openly or secretly, you are no longer my secretary; you receive forthwith six months' salary in lieu of notice, and—you leave me instantly."

"Very well, Charles," I answered, in a submissive voice, though I debated with myself for a moment whether it would be best to stick to the ready money and quit the sinking ship, or to hold fast by my friend and back Charles' luck against the Professor's science. After a short, sharp struggle with my own mind, I am proud to say friendship and gratitude won. I was sure that, whether diamonds went up or down, Charles Vandrift was the sort of man who would come to the top in the end in spite of everything. And I decided to stand by him!

I slept little that night, however. At breakfast Charles also looked haggard and moody. He ordered the carriage early, and drove straight into the City.

There was a block in Cheapside. Charles, impatient and nervous, jumped out and walked. I walked beside him. Near Wood Street a man we knew casually stopped us.

"Halloa, Sir Charles!" he called out, in a bantering tone. "What's all this about diamonds? Where are Cloetedorps today? Is it Golconda, or Queer Street?"

Charles drew himself up very stiff. "I fail to understand you," he answered, with dignity.

"Why, you were there yourself," the man cried. "Last night at Sir Adolphus'! Oh yes, it's all over the place; Schleiermacher of Jena has succeeded in making the most perfect diamonds—for sixpence apiece—as good as real—and South Africa's ancient history. There's a slump in Golcondas."

Charles moved on, disgusted. The man's manners were atrocious. Near the Bank we ran up against a most respectable jobber.

"Ah, Sir Charles," he said, "you here? Well, this is strange news, isn't it? For my part, I advise you not to take it too seriously. Your stock will go down, of course, like lead this morning. But it'll rise to-morrow, mark my words, and fluctuate every hour till the discovery's proved or disproved for certain."

The general opinion was that Cloetedorps were doomed, and that the sooner a man cleared out the less was he likely to lose by it.

Charles strode on like a general; but it was a Napoleon brazening out his retreat from Moscow. His mien was resolute. He disappeared at last into the precincts of an office, waving me back not to follow. After a long consultation he came out and rejoined me.

All day long the City rang with Golcondas, Golcondas. Everybody murmured, "Slump, slump in Golcondas." But Charles stood firm as a rock, and so did his brokers. "I don't want to sell," he said, doggedly. "The whole thing is trumped up. It's a mere piece of jugglery. For my own part, I believe Professor Schleiermacher is deceived, or else is deceiving us. His brokers, Finglemores, had only one answer to all inquiries: 'Sir Charles has every confidence in the stability of Golcondas, and doesn't wish to sell or to increase the panic.'"

He went home that night more harassed and ill than I have ever seen him. Next day was as bad. The slump continued, with varying episodes.

The morning after, as if by miracle, things righted themselves of a sudden. While we were wondering what it meant, Charles received a telegram from Sir Adolphus Cordery:

"The man is a fraud. Not Schleiermacher at all. Just had a wire from Jena saying the Professor knows nothing about him. Sorry unintentionally to have caused you trouble. Come round and see me."

Sorry unintentionally to have caused you trouble. Charles was beside himself with anger. Sir Adolphus had upset the share market for forty-eight mortal hours, half-ruined a round dozen of wealthy operators, and now he apologized for it as one might apologize for being ten minutes late for dinner! Charles jumped into a hansom and rushed round to see him. How had he dared to introduce the impostor to solid men as Professor Schleiermacher? Sir Adolphus shrugged his shoulders. The fellow had come and introduced himself as the great Jena chemist. What reason had he for doubting his word? Besides, what object could the creature have for this most extraordinary deception? Charles knew only too well. It was clear it was done to disturb the diamond market, and we realized too late that the man who had done it was—Colonel Clay.

Doubtless, with his extraordinary sleight-of-hand, he had substituted real diamonds for the shapeless mass that came out of the apparatus in the interval between handing the pebbles round for inspection and distributing them piecemeal to the men of science and representatives of the diamond interest. We all watched him closely, of course, when he opened the crucibles, but when once we had satisfied ourselves that something came out our doubts were set at rest, and we forgot to watch whether he distributed those something or not to the recipients. As usual, too, the Professor had disappeared into space the moment his trick was once well performed.

Charles went home more angry than I have ever beheld him. I endeavored to console him. "After all," I said, "though Golcondas have suffered a temporary loss, it's a comfort to think that you should have stood so firm, and not only stemmed the tide, but also prevented yourself from losing anything at all of your own through panic."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]