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An African Millionaire

An
African Millionaire

By
Grant Allen
Author of "A Woman who Did," etc.



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I

THE EPISODE OF THE MEXICAN SEER

MY name is Seymour Wilbraham Wentworth. I am brother-in-law and secretary to Sir Charles Vandrift, the South African millionaire and famous financier. Many years ago, when Charlie Vandrift was a small lawyer in Cape Town, I had the (qualified) good fortune to marry his sister. Much later, when the Vandrift estate and farm near Kimberley developed by degrees into the Cloetedorp Golcondas, Limited, my brother-in-law offered me the not unremunerative post of secretary; in which capacity I have ever since been his constant and attached companion.

He is not a man whom any common sharper can take in, is Charles Vandrift. Middle height, square build, firm mouth, keen eyes—the very picture of a sharp and successful business genius. I have only known one rogue impose upon Sir Charles, and that one rogue, as the Commissary of Police at Nice remarked, would doubtless have imposed upon a syndicate of Vidocq, Robert Houdin, and Cagliostro.

B

We had run across to the Riviera for a few weeks in the season. Our object being strictly rest and recreation from the arduous duties of financial combination, we did not think it necessary to take our wives out with us. Indeed, Lady Vandrift is absolutely wedded to the joys of London, and does not appreciate the rural delights of the Mediterranean littoral. But Sir Charles and I, though immersed in affairs when at home, both thoroughly enjoy the complete change from the City to the charming vegetation and pellucid air on the terrace at Monte Carlo. We *are* so fond of scenery. That delicious view over the rocks of Monaco, with the Maritime Alps in the rear, and the blue sea in front, not to mention the imposing Casino in the foreground, appeals to me as one of the most beautiful prospects in all Europe. Sir Charles has a sentimental attachment for the place. He finds it restores and freshens him, after the turmoil of London, to win a few hundreds at roulette in the course of an afternoon among the palms and cactuses and pure breezes of Monte Carlo. The country, say I, for a jaded intellect! However, we never on any account actually stop in the Principality itself. Sir Charles thinks Monte Carlo is not a sound address for a financier's letters. He prefers a comfortable hotel on the Promenade des Anglais at Nice, where he recovers health and renovates his nervous system by taking daily excursions along the coast to the Casino.

This particular season we were snugly ensconced

at the Hôtel des Anglais. We had capital quarters on the first floor—salon, study, and bedrooms—and found on the spot a most agreeable cosmopolitan society. All Nice, just then, was ringing with talk about a curious impostor, known to his followers as the Great Mexican Seer, and supposed to be gifted with second sight, as well as with endless other supernatural powers. Now, it is a peculiarity of my able brother-in-law's that, when he meets with a quack, he burns to expose him; he is so keen a man of business himself that it gives him, so to speak, a disinterested pleasure to unmask and detect imposture in others. Many ladies at the hotel, some of whom had met and conversed with the Mexican Seer, were constantly telling us strange stories of his doings. He had disclosed to one the present whereabouts of a runaway husband; he had pointed out to another the numbers that would win at roulette next evening; he had shown a third the image on a screen of the man she had for years adored without his knowledge. Of course, Sir Charles didn't believe a word of it; but his curiosity was roused; he wished to see and judge for himself of the wonderful thought-reader.

'What would be his terms, do you think, for a private *séance*?' he asked of Madame Picardet, the lady to whom the Seer had successfully predicted the winning numbers.

'He does not work for money,' Madame Picardet answered, 'but for the good of humanity. I'm sure

he would gladly come and exhibit for nothing his miraculous faculties.'

'Nonsense!' Sir Charles answered. 'The man must live. I'd pay him five guineas, though, to see him alone. What hotel is he stopping at?'

'The Cosmopolitan, I think,' the lady answered. 'Oh no; I remember now, the Westminster.'

Sir Charles turned to me quietly. 'Look here, Seymour,' he whispered. 'Go round to this fellow's place immediately after dinner, and offer him five pounds to give a private *séance* at once in my rooms, without mentioning who I am to him; keep the name quite quiet. Bring him back with you, too, and come straight upstairs with him, so that there may be no collusion. We'll see just how much the fellow can tell us.'

I went as directed. I found the Seer a very remarkable and interesting person. He stood about Sir Charles's own height, but was slimmer and straighter, with an aquiline nose, strangely piercing eyes, very large black pupils, and a finely-chiselled close-shaven face, like the bust of Antinous in our hall in Mayfair. What gave him his most characteristic touch, however, was his odd head of hair, curly and wavy like Paderewski's, standing out in a halo round his high white forehead and his delicate profile. I could see at a glance why he succeeded so well in impressing women; he had the look of a poet, a singer, a prophet.

'I have come round,' I said, 'to ask whether you

will consent to give a *séance* at once in a friend's rooms ; and my principal wishes me to add that he is prepared to pay five pounds as the price of the entertainment.'

Señor Antonio Herrera—that was what he called himself—bowed to me with impressive Spanish politeness. His dusky olive cheeks were wrinkled with a smile of gentle contempt as he answered gravely—

'I do not sell my gifts ; I bestow them freely. If your friend—your anonymous friend—desires to behold the cosmic wonders that are wrought through my hands, I am glad to show them to him. Fortunately, as often happens when it is necessary to convince and confound a sceptic (for that your friend is a sceptic I feel instinctively), I chance to have no engagements at all this evening.' He ran his hand through his fine, long hair reflectively. 'Yes, I go,' he continued, as if addressing some unknown presence that hovered about the ceiling ; 'I go ; come with me!' Then he put on his broad sombrero, with its crimson ribbon, wrapped a cloak round his shoulders, lighted a cigarette, and strode forth by my side towards the *Hôtel des Anglais*.

He talked little by the way, and that little in curt sentences. He seemed buried in deep thought ; indeed, when we reached the door and I turned in, he walked a step or two farther on, as if not noticing to what place I had brought him. Then he drew himself up short, and gazed around him for a

moment. 'Ha, the Anglais,' he said—and I may mention in passing that his English, in spite of a slight southern accent, was idiomatic and excellent.



YES, I GO.

'It is here, then ; it is here !' He was addressing once more the unseen presence.

I smiled to think that these childish devices were intended to deceive Sir Charles Vandrift. Not

quite the sort of man (as the City of London knows) to be taken in by hocus-pocus. And all this, I saw, was the cheapest and most commonplace conjurer's patter.

We went upstairs to our rooms. Charles had gathered together a few friends to watch the performance. The Seer entered, wrapt in thought. He was in evening dress, but a red sash round his waist gave a touch of picturesqueness and a dash of colour. He paused for a moment in the middle of the salon, without letting his eyes rest on anybody or anything. Then he walked straight up to Charles, and held out his dark hand.

'Good-evening,' he said. 'You are the host. My soul's sight tells me so.'

'Good shot,' Sir Charles answered. 'These fellows have to be quick-witted, you know, Mrs. Mackenzie, or they'd never get on at it.'

The Seer gazed about him, and smiled blankly at a person or two whose faces he seemed to recognise from a previous existence. Then Charles began to ask him a few simple questions, not about himself, but about me, just to test him. He answered most of them with surprising correctness. 'His name? His name begins with an S I think:—You call him Seymour.' He paused long between each clause, as if the facts were revealed to him slowly. 'Seymour—Wilbraham—Earl of Strafford. No, not Earl of Strafford! Seymour Wilbraham Wentworth. There seems to be some connection

in somebody's mind now present between Wentworth and Strafford. I am not English. I do not know what it means. But they are somehow the same name, Wentworth and Strafford.'

He gazed around, apparently for confirmation. A lady came to his rescue.

'Wentworth was the surname of the great Earl of Strafford,' she murmured gently; 'and I was wondering, as you spoke, whether Mr. Wentworth might possibly be descended from him.'

'He is,' the Seer replied instantly, with a flash of those dark eyes. And I thought this curious; for though my father always maintained the reality of the relationship, there was one link wanting to complete the pedigree. He could not make sure that the Hon. Thomas Wilbraham Wentworth was the father of Jonathan Wentworth, the Bristol horse-dealer, from whom we are descended.

'Where was I born?' Sir Charles interrupted, coming suddenly to his own case.

The Seer clapped his two hands to his forehead and held it between them, as if to prevent it from bursting. 'Africa,' he said slowly, as the facts narrowed down, so to speak. 'South Africa; Cape of Good Hope; Jansenville; De Witt Street. 1840.'

'By Jove, he's correct,' Sir Charles muttered. 'He seems really to do it. Still, he may have found me out. He may have known where he was coming.'

'I never gave a hint,' I answered; till he reached

the door, he didn't even know to what hotel I was piloting him.'

The Seer stroked his chin softly. His eye appeared to me to have a furtive gleam in it. 'Would you, like me to tell you the number of a bank-note inclosed in an envelope?' he asked casually.

'Go out of the room,' Sir Charles said, 'while I pass it round the company.'

Señor Herrera disappeared. Sir Charles passed it round cautiously, holding it all the time in his own hand, but letting his guests see the number. Then he placed it in an envelope and gummed it down firmly.

The Seer returned. His keen eyes swept the company with a comprehensive glance. He shook his shaggy mane. Then he took the envelope in his hands and gazed at it fixedly. 'AF, 73549,' he answered, in a slow tone. 'A Bank of England note for fifty pounds—exchanged at the Casino for gold won yesterday at Monte Carlo.'

'I see how he did that,' Sir Charles said triumphantly. 'He must have changed it there himself; and then I changed it back again. In point of fact, I remember seeing a fellow with long hair loafing about. Still, it's capital conjuring.'

'He can see through matter,' one of the ladies interposed. It was Madame Picardet. 'He can see through a box.' She drew a little gold vinaigrette, such as our grandmothers used, from her dress-

pocket. 'What is in this?' she inquired, holding it up to him.

Señor Herrera gazed through it. 'Three gold coins,' he replied, knitting his brows with the effort of seeing into the box: 'one, an American five dollars; one, a French ten-franc piece; one, twenty marks, German, of the old Emperor William.'

She opened the box and passed it round. Sir Charles smiled a quiet smile.

'Confederacy!' he muttered, half to himself. 'Confederacy!'

The Seer turned to him with a sullen air. 'You want a better sign?' he said, in a very impressive voice. 'A sign that will convince you! Very well: you have a letter in your left waistcoat pocket—a crumpled-up letter. Do you wish me to read it out? I will, if you desire it.'

It may seem to those who know Sir Charles incredible, but, I am bound to admit, my brother-in-law coloured. What that letter contained I cannot say; he only answered, very testily and evasively, 'No, thank you; I won't trouble you. The exhibition you have already given us of your skill in this kind more than amply suffices.' And his fingers strayed nervously to his waistcoat pocket, as if he was half afraid, even then, Señor Herrera would read it.

I fancied, too, he glanced somewhat anxiously towards Madame Picardet.

The Seer bowed courteously. 'Your will, señor,

is law,' he said. 'I make it a principle, though I can see through all things, invariably to respect the secrecies and sanctities. If it were not so, I might dissolve society. For which of us is there who could bear the whole truth being told about him?' He gazed around the room. An unpleasant thrill supervened. Most of us felt this uncanny Spanish American knew really too much. And some of us were engaged in financial operations.

'For example,' the Seer continued blandly, 'I happened a few weeks ago to travel down here from Paris by train with a very intelligent man, a company promoter. He had in his bag some documents—some confidential documents:' he glanced at Sir Charles. 'You know the kind of thing, my dear sir: reports from experts—from mining engineers. You may have seen some such; marked *strictly private*.'

'They form an element in high finance,' Sir Charles admitted coldly.

'Pre-cisely,' the Seer murmured, his accent for a moment less Spanish than before. 'And, as they were marked *strictly private*, I respect, of course, the seal of confidence. That's all I wish to say. I hold it a duty, being intrusted with such powers, not to use them in a manner which may annoy or incommode my fellow-creatures.'

'Your feeling does you honour,' Sir Charles answered, with some acerbity. Then he whispered in my ear: 'Confounded clever scoundrel, Sey; rather wish we hadn't brought him here.'

Señor Herrera seemed intuitively to divine this wish, for he interposed, in a lighter and gayer tone—

‘I will now show you a different and more interesting embodiment of occult power, for which we shall need a somewhat subdued arrangement of surrounding lights. Would you mind, señor host—for I have purposely abstained from reading your name on the brain of any one present—would you mind my turning down this lamp just a little? . . . So! That will do. Now, this one; and this one. Exactly! that’s right.’ He poured a few grains of powder out of a packet into a saucer. ‘Next, a match, if you please. Thank you!’ It burnt with a strange green light. He drew from his pocket a card, and produced a little ink-bottle. ‘Have you a pen?’ he asked.

I instantly brought one. He handed it to Sir Charles. ‘Oblige me,’ he said, ‘by writing your name there.’ And he indicated a place in the centre of the card, which had an embossed edge, with a small middle square of a different colour.

Sir Charles has a natural disinclination to signing his name without knowing why. ‘What do you want with it?’ he asked. (A millionaire’s signature has so many uses.)

‘I want you to put the card in an envelope,’ the Seer replied, ‘and then to burn it. After that, I shall show you your own name written in letters of blood on my arm, in your own handwriting.’

Sir Charles took the pen. If the signature was

to be burned as soon as finished, he didn't mind giving it. He wrote his name in his usual firm clear style—the writing of a man who knows his worth and is not afraid of drawing a cheque for five thousand.

'Look at it long,' the Seer said, from the other side of the room. He had not watched him write it.

Sir Charles stared at it fixedly. The Seer was really beginning to produce an impression.

'Now, put it in that envelope,' the Seer exclaimed.

Sir Charles, like a lamb, placed it as directed.

The Seer strode forward. 'Give me the envelope,' he said. He took it in his hand, walked over towards the fireplace, and solemnly burnt it. 'See—it crumbles into ashes,' he cried. Then he came back to the middle of the room, close to the green light, rolled up his sleeve, and held his arm before Sir Charles. There, in blood-red letters, my brother-in-law read the name, 'Charles Vandrift,' in his own handwriting!

'I see how that's done,' Sir Charles murmured, drawing back. 'It's a clever delusion; but still, I see through it. It's like that ghost-book. Your ink was deep green; your light was green; you made me look at it long; and then I saw the same thing written on the skin of your arm in complementary colours.'

'You think so?' the Seer replied, with a curious curl of the lip.

'I'm sure of it,' Sir Charles answered.

Quick as lightning the Seer again rolled up his sleeve. 'That's your name,' he cried, in a very clear voice, 'but not your whole name. What do you say, then, to my right? Is this one also a complementary colour?' He held his other arm out. There, in sea-green letters, I read the name, 'Charles



IN BLOOD-RED LETTERS, MY BROTHER-IN-LAW READ THE NAME.

O'Sullivan Vandrift.' It is my brother-in-law's full baptismal designation; but he has dropped the O'Sullivan for many years past, and, to say the truth, doesn't like it. He is a little bit ashamed of his mother's family.

Charles glanced at it hurriedly. 'Quite right,' he said, 'quite right!' But his voice was hollow. I could guess he didn't care to continue the *séance*. He could see through the man, of course; but it

was clear the fellow knew too much about us to be entirely pleasant.

'Turn up the lights,' I said, and a servant turned them. 'Shall I say coffee and benedictine?' I whispered to Vandrift.

'By all means,' he answered. 'Anything to keep this fellow from further impertinences! And, I say, don't you think you'd better suggest at the same time that the men should smoke? Even these ladies are not above a cigarette—some of them.'

There was a sigh of relief. The lights burned brightly. The Seer for the moment retired from business, so to speak. He accepted a partaga with a very good grace, sipped his coffee in a corner, and chatted to the lady who had suggested Strafford with marked politeness. He was a polished gentleman.

Next morning, in the hall of the hotel, I saw Madame Picardet again, in a neat tailor-made travelling dress, evidently bound for the railway-station.

'What, off, Madame Picardet?' I cried.

She smiled, and held out her prettily-gloved hand. 'Yes, I'm off,' she answered archly. 'Florence, or Rome, or somewhere. I've drained Nice dry—like a sucked orange. Got all the fun I can out of it. Now I'm away again to my beloved Italy.'

But it struck me as odd that, if Italy was her game, she went by the omnibus which takes down

to the *train de luxe* for Paris. However, a man of the world accepts what a lady tells him, no matter how improbable; and I confess, for ten days or so, I thought no more about her, or the Seer either.

At the end of that time our fortnightly pass-book came in from the bank in London. It is part of my duty, as the millionaire's secretary, to make up this book once a fortnight, and to compare the cancelled cheques with Sir Charles's counterfoils. On this particular occasion I happened to observe what I can only describe as a very grave discrepancy, —in fact, a discrepancy of £5000. On the wrong side, too. Sir Charles was debited with £5000 more than the total amount that was shown on the counterfoils.

I examined the book with care. The source of the error was obvious. It lay in a cheque to Self or Bearer, for £5000, signed by Sir Charles, and evidently paid across the counter in London, as it bore on its face no stamp or indication of any other office.

I called in my brother-in-law from the salon to the study. 'Look here, Charles,' I said, 'there's a cheque in the book which you haven't entered.' And I handed it to him without comment, for I thought it might have been drawn to settle some little loss on the turf or at cards, or to make up some other affair he didn't desire to mention to me. These things will happen.

He looked at it and stared hard. Then he pursed up his mouth and gave a long low 'Whew!' At last he turned it over and remarked, 'I say, Sey, my boy, we've just been done jolly well brown, haven't we?'

I glanced at the cheque. 'How do you mean?' I inquired.

'Why, the Seer,' he replied, still staring at it ruefully. 'I don't mind the five thou., but to think the fellow should have gammoned the pair of us like that—ignominious, I call it!'

'How do you know it's the Seer?' I asked.

'Look at the green ink,' he answered. 'Besides, I recollect the very shape of the last flourish. I flourished a bit like that in the excitement of the moment, which I don't always do with my regular signature.'

'He's done us,' I answered, recognising it. 'But how the dickens did he manage to transfer it to the cheque? This looks like your own handwriting, Charles, not a clever forgery.'

'It is,' he said. 'I admit it—I can't deny it. Only fancy his bamboozling me when I was most on my guard! I wasn't to be taken in by any of his silly occult tricks and catch-words; but it never occurred to me he was going to victimise me financially in this way. I expected attempts at a loan or an extortion; but to collar my signature to a blank cheque—atrocious!'

'How did he manage it?' I asked.

C

'I haven't the faintest conception. I only know those are the words I wrote. I could swear to them anywhere.'

'Then you can't protest the cheque?

'Unfortunately, no; it's my own true signature.'



We went that afternoon without delay to see the Chief Commissary of Police at the office. He was a gentlemanly Frenchman, much less formal and red-tapey than usual, and he spoke excellent English with an American accent, having acted, in fact, as a detective in New York for about ten years in his early manhood.

'I guess,' he said slowly, after hearing our story,

'you've been victimised right here by Colonel Clay, gentlemen.'

'Who is Colonel Clay?' Sir Charles asked.

'That's just what I want to know,' the Commissary answered, in his curious American-French-English. 'He is a Colonel, because he occasionally gives himself a commission; he is called Colonel Clay, because he appears to possess an india-rubber face, and he can mould it like clay in the hands of the potter. Real name, unknown. Nationality, equally French and English. Address, usually Europe. Profession, former maker of wax figures to the Musée Grévin. Age, what he chooses. Employs his knowledge to mould his own nose and cheeks, with wax additions, to the character he desires to personate. Aquiline this time, you say. *Hein!* Anything like these photographs?'

He rummaged in his desk and handed us two.

'Not in the least,' Sir Charles answered. 'Except, perhaps, as to the neck, everything here is quite unlike him.'

'Then that's the Colonel!' the Commissary answered, with decision, rubbing his hands in glee. 'Look here,' and he took out a pencil and rapidly sketched the outline of one of the two faces—that of a bland-looking young man, with no expression worth mentioning. 'There's the Colonel in his simple disguise. Very good. Now watch me: figure to yourself that he adds here a tiny patch of wax to his nose—an aquiline bridge—just so; well,

you have him right there ; and the chin, ah, one touch : now, for hair, a wig : for complexion, nothing easier : that's the profile of your rascal, isn't it ?'

'Exactly,' we both murmured. By two curves of the pencil, and a shock of false hair, the face was transmuted.

'He had very large eyes, with very big pupils, though,' I objected, looking close ; 'and the man in the photograph here has them small and boiled-fishy.'

'That's so,' the Commissary answered. 'A drop of belladonna expands—and produces the Scer ; five grains of opium contract—and give a dead-alive, stupidly-innocent appearance. Well, you leave this affair to me, gentlemen. I'll see the fun out. I don't say I'll catch him for you ; nobody ever yet has caught Colonel Clay ; but I'll explain how he did the trick ; and that ought to be consolation enough to a man of your means for a trifle of five thousand !'

'You are not the conventional French office-holder, M. le Commissaire,' I ventured to interpose.

'You bet !' the Commissary replied, and drew himself up like a captain of infantry. 'Messieurs,' he continued, in French, with the utmost dignity, 'I shall devote the resources of this office to tracing out the crime, and, if possible, to effectuating the arrest of the culpable.'

We telegraphed to London, of course, and we wrote to the bank, with a full description of the

suspected person. But I need hardly add that nothing came of it.

Three days later the Commissary called at our hotel. 'Well, gentlemen,' he said, 'I am glad to say I have discovered everything!'

'What? Arrested the Seer?' Sir Charles cried.

The Commissary drew back, almost horrified at the suggestion.

'Arrested Colonel Clay?' he exclaimed. '*Mais, monsieur*, we are only human! Arrested him? No, not quite. But tracked out how he did it. That is already much—to unravel Colonel Clay, gentlemen!'

'Well, what do you make of it?' Sir Charles asked, crestfallen.

The Commissary sat down and gloated over his discovery. It was clear a well-planned crime amused him vastly. 'In the first place, *monsieur*,' he said, 'disabuse your mind of the idea that when *monsieur* your secretary went out to fetch Señor Herrera that night, Señor Herrera didn't know to whose rooms he was coming. Quite otherwise, in point of fact. I do not doubt myself that Señor Herrera, or Colonel Clay (call him which you like), came to Nice this winter for no other purpose than just to rob you.'

'But I sent for him,' my brother-in-law interposed.

'Yes; he *meant* you to send for him. He forced a card, so to speak. If he couldn't do that I guess he would be a pretty poor conjurer. He had a lady of his own—his wife, let us say, or his sister—

stopping here at this hotel; a certain Madame Picardet. Through her he induced several ladies of your circle to attend his *séances*. She and they spoke to you about him, and aroused your curiosity. You may bet your bottom dollar that when he came to this room he came ready primed and prepared with endless facts about both of you.'

'What fools we have been, Sey,' my brother-in-law exclaimed. 'I see it all now. That designing woman sent round before dinner to say I wanted to meet him; and by the time you got there he was ready for bamboozling me.'

'That's so,' the Commissary answered. 'He had your name ready painted on both his arms; and he had made other preparations of still greater importance.'

'You mean the cheque. Well, how did he get it?'

The Commissary opened the door. 'Come in,' he said. And a young man entered whom we recognised at once as the chief clerk in the Foreign Department of the *Crédit Marseillais*, the principal bank all along the Riviera.

'State what you know of this cheque,' the Commissary said, showing it to him, for we had handed it over to the police as a piece of evidence.

'About four weeks since——' the clerk began.

'Say ten days before your *séance*,' the Commissary interposed.

'A gentleman with very long hair and an aquiline

nose, dark, strange, and handsome, called in at my department and asked if I could tell him the name of Sir Charles Vandrift's London banker. He said he had a sum to pay in to your credit, and asked if we would forward it for him. I told him it was irregular for us to receive the money, as you had no account with us, but that your London bankers were Darby, Drummond, and Rothenberg, Limited.'

'Quite right,' Sir Charles murmured.

'Two days later a lady, Madame Picardet, who was a customer of ours, brought in a good cheque for three hundred pounds, signed by a first-rate name, and asked us to pay it in on her behalf to Darby, Drummond, and Rothenberg's, and to open a London account with them for her. We did so, and received in reply a cheque-book.'

'From which this cheque was taken, as I learn from the number, by telegram from London,' the Commissary put in. 'Also, that on the same day on which your cheque was cashed, Madame Picardet, in London, withdrew her balance.'

'But how did the fellow get me to sign the cheque?' Sir Charles cried. 'How did he manage the card trick?'

The Commissary produced a similar card from his pocket. 'Was that the sort of thing?' he asked.

'Precisely! A facsimile.'

'I thought so. Well, our Colonel, I find, bought a packet of such cards, intended for admission to a

religious function, at a shop in the Quai Masséna. He cut out the centre, and, see here——' The Commissary turned it over, and showed a piece of paper pasted neatly over the back ; this he tore off,



MADAME PICARDET WITHDREW HER
BALANCE.

and there, concealed behind it, lay a folded cheque, with only the place where the signature should be written showing through on the face which the Seer had presented to us. 'I call that a neat trick,' the Commissary remarked, with professional enjoyment of a really good deception.

'But he burnt the envelope before my eyes,' Sir Charles exclaimed.

'Pooh!' the Commissary answered. 'What would he be worth as a conjurer, anyway, if he couldn't substitute one envelope for another between the table and the fireplace without your noticing it? And Colonel Clay, you must remember, is a prince among conjurers.'

'Well, it's a comfort to know we've identified our man, and the woman who was with him,' Sir Charles said, with a slight sigh of relief. 'The next thing will be, of course, you'll follow them up on these clues in England and arrest them?'

The Commissary shrugged his shoulders. 'Arrest them!' he exclaimed, much amused. 'Ah, monsieur, but you are sanguine! No officer of justice has ever succeeded in arresting le Colonel Caoutchouc, as we call him in French. He is as slippery as an eel, that man. He wriggles through our fingers. Suppose even we caught him, what could we prove? I ask you. Nobody who has seen him once can ever swear to him again in his next impersonation. He is *impayable*, this good Colonel. On the day when I arrest him, I assure you, monsieur, I shall consider myself the smartest police-officer in Europe.'

'Well, I shall catch him yet,' Sir Charles answered, and relapsed into silence.

II

THE EPISODE OF THE DIAMOND LINKS

'LET us take a trip to Switzerland,' said Lady Vandrift. And any one who knows Amelia will not be surprised to learn that we *did* take a trip to Switzerland accordingly. Nobody can drive Sir Charles, except his wife. And nobody at all can drive Amelia.

There were difficulties at the outset, because we had not ordered rooms at the hotels beforehand, and it was well on in the season; but they were overcome at last by the usual application of a golden key; and we found ourselves in due time pleasantly quartered in Lucerne, at that most comfortable of European hostelries, the Schweitzerhof.

We were a square party of four—Sir Charles and Amelia, myself and Isabel. We had nice big rooms, on the first floor, overlooking the lake; and as none of us was possessed with the faintest symptom of that incipient mania which shows itself in the form of an insane desire to climb mountain heights of disagreeable steepness and unnecessary snowiness, I will venture to assert we all enjoyed ourselves. We

spent most of our time sensibly in lounging about the lake on the jolly little steamers; and when we did a mountain climb, it was on the Rigi or Pilatus—where an engine undertook all the muscular work for us.

As usual, at the hotel, a great many miscellaneous people showed a burning desire to be specially nice to us. If you wish to see how friendly and charming humanity is, just try being a well-known millionaire for a week, and you'll learn a thing or two. Wherever Sir Charles goes he is surrounded by charming and disinterested people, all eager to make his distinguished acquaintance, and all familiar with several excellent investments, or several deserving objects of Christian charity. It is my business in life, as his brother-in-law and secretary, to decline with thanks the excellent investments, and to throw judicious cold water on the objects of charity. Even I myself, as the great man's almoner, am very much sought after. People casually allude before me to artless stories of 'poor curates in Cumberland, you know, Mr. Wentworth,' or widows in Cornwall, penniless poets with epics in their desks, and young painters who need but the breath of a patron to open to them the doors of an admiring Academy. I smile and look wise, while I administer cold water in minute doses; but I never report one of these cases to Sir Charles, except in the rare or almost unheard-of event where I think there is really something in them.

Ever since our little adventure with the Seer at Nice, Sir Charles, who is constitutionally cautious, had been even more careful than usual about possible sharpers. And, as chance would have it, there sat just opposite us at *table d'hôte* at the Schweitzerhof—'tis a fad of Amelia's to dine at *table d'hôte*; she says she can't bear to be boxed up all day in private rooms with 'too much family'—a sinister-looking man with dark hair and eyes, conspicuous by his bushy overhanging eyebrows. My attention was first called to the eyebrows in question by a nice little parson who sat at our side, and who observed that they were made up of certain large and bristly hairs, which (he told us) had been traced by Darwin to our monkey ancestors. Very pleasant little fellow, this fresh-faced young parson, on his honeymoon tour with a nice wee wife, a bonnie Scotch lassie with a charming accent.

I looked at the eyebrows close. Then a sudden thought struck me. 'Do you believe they're his own?' I asked of the curate; 'or are they only stuck on—a make-up disguise? They really almost look like it.'

'You don't suppose——' Charles began, and checked himself suddenly.

'Yes, I do,' I answered; 'the Seer!' Then I recollected my blunder, and looked down sheepishly. For, to say the truth, Vandrift had straightly enjoined on me long before to say nothing of our painful little episode at Nice to Amelia; he was

afraid if *she* once heard of it, *he* would hear of it for ever after.

'What Seer?' the little parson inquired, with parsonical curiosity.

I noticed the man with the overhanging eyebrows give a queer sort of start. Charles's glance was fixed upon me. I hardly knew what to answer.

'Oh, a man who was at Nice with us last year,' I stammered out, trying hard to look unconcerned. 'A fellow they talked about, that's all.' And I turned the subject.

But the curate, like a donkey, wouldn't let me turn it.

'Had he eyebrows like that?' he inquired, in an undertone. I was really angry. If this *was* Colonel Clay, the curate was obviously giving him the cue, and making it much more difficult for us to catch him, now we might possibly have lighted on the chance of doing so.

'No, he hadn't,' I answered testily; 'it was a passing expression. But this is not the man. I was mistaken, no doubt.' And I nudged him gently.

The little curate was too innocent for anything. 'Oh, I see,' he replied, nodding hard and looking wise. Then he turned to his wife and made an obvious face, which the man with the eyebrows couldn't fail to notice.

Fortunately, a political discussion going on a few places farther down the table spread up to us and diverted attention for a moment. The magical name

of Gladstone saved us. Sir Charles flared up. I was truly pleased, for I could see Amelia was boiling over with curiosity by this time.



THE MAN WITH THE BIG EYEBROWS SIDLED UP.

After dinner, in the billiard-room, however, the man with the big eyebrows sidled up and began to talk to me. If he *was* Colonel Clay, it was evident he bore us no grudge at all for the five thousand pounds

he had done us out of. On the contrary, he seemed quite prepared to do us out of five thousand more when opportunity offered; for he introduced himself at once as Dr. Hector Macpherson, the exclusive grantee of extensive concessions from the Brazilian Government on the Upper Amazons. He dived into conversation with me at once as to the splendid mineral resources of his Brazilian estate—the silver, the platinum, the actual rubies, the possible diamonds. I listened and smiled; I knew what was coming. All he needed to develop this magnificent concession was a little more capital. It was sad to see thousands of pounds' worth of platinum and car-loads of rubies just crumbling in the soil or carried away by the river, for want of a few hundreds to work them with properly. If he knew of anybody, now, with money to invest, he could recommend him—nay, offer him—a unique opportunity of earning, say, 40 per cent on his capital, on unimpeachable security.

'I wouldn't do it for every man,' Dr. Hector Macpherson remarked, drawing himself up; 'but if I took a fancy to a fellow who had command of ready cash, I might choose to put him in the way of feathering his nest with unexampled rapidity.'

'Exceedingly disinterested of you,' I answered drily, fixing my eyes on his eyebrows.

The little curate, meanwhile, was playing billiards with Sir Charles. His glance followed mine as it rested for a moment on the monkey-like hairs.

'False, obviously false,' he remarked with his lips;

and I'm bound to confess I never saw any man speak so well by movement alone ; you could follow every word though not a sound escaped him.

During the rest of that evening Dr. Hector Macpherson stuck to me as close as a mustard-plaster. And he was almost as irritating. I got heartily sick of the Upper Amazons. I have positively waded in my time through ruby mines (in prospectuses, I mean) till the mere sight of a ruby absolutely sickens me. When Charles, in an unwonted fit of generosity, once gave his sister Isabel (whom I had the honour to marry) a ruby necklet (inferior stones), I made Isabel change it for sapphires and amethysts, on the judicious plea that they suited her complexion better. (I scored one, incidentally, for having considered Isabel's complexion.) By the time I went to bed I was prepared to sink the Upper Amazons in the sea, and to stab, shoot, poison, or otherwise seriously damage the man with the concession and the false eyebrows.

For the next three days, at intervals, he returned to the charge. He bored me to death with his platinum and his rubies. He didn't want a capitalist who would personally exploit the thing ; he would prefer to do it all on his own account, giving the capitalist preference debentures of his bogus company, and a lien on the concession. I listened and smiled ; I listened and yawned ; I listened and was rude ; I ceased to listen at all ; but still he droned on with it. I fell asleep on the steamer one day, and woke

up in ten minutes to hear him droning yet, 'And the yield of platinum per ton was certified to be——' I forget how many pounds, or ounces, or penny-weights. These details of assays have ceased to interest me: like the man who 'didn't believe in ghosts,' I have seen too many of them.

The fresh-faced little curate and his wife, however, were quite different people. He was a cricketing Oxford man; she was a breezy Scotch lass, with a wholesome breath of the Highlands about her. I called her 'White Heather.' Their name was Brabazon. Millionaires are so accustomed to being beset by harpies of every description, that when they come across a young couple who are simple and natural, they delight in the purely human relation. We picnicked and went excursions a great deal with the honeymooners. They were so frank in their young love, and so proof against chaff, that we all really liked them. But whenever I called the pretty girl 'White Heather,' she looked so shocked, and cried: 'Oh, Mr. Wentworth!' Still, we were the best of friends. The curate offered to row us in a boat on the lake one day, while the Scotch lassie assured us she could take an oar almost as well as he did. However, we did not accept their offer, as row-boats exert an unfavourable influence upon Amelia's digestive organs.

'Nice young fellow, that man Brabazon,' Sir Charles said to me one day, as we lounged together along the quay; 'never talks about advowsons or

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next presentations. Doesn't seem to me to care two pins about promotion. Says he's quite content in his country curacy; enough to live upon, and needs no more; and his wife has a little, a very little, money. I asked him about his poor to-day, on purpose to test him: these parsons are always trying to screw something out of one for their poor; men in my position know the truth of the saying that we have that class of the population always with us. Would you believe it, he says he hasn't any poor at all in his parish! They're all well-to-do farmers or else able-bodied labourers, and his one terror is that somebody will come and try to pauperise them. "If a philanthropist were to give me fifty pounds to-day for use at Empingham," he said, "I assure you, Sir Charles, I shouldn't know what to do with it. I think I should buy new dresses for Jessie, who wants them about as much as anybody else in the village—that is to say, not at all." There's a parson for you, Sey, my boy. Only wish we had one of his sort at Seldon.'

'He certainly doesn't want to get anything out of you,' I answered.

That evening at dinner a queer little episode happened. The man with the eyebrows began talking to me across the table in his usual fashion, full of his wearisome concession on the Upper Amazons. I was trying to squash him as politely as possible, when I caught Amelia's eye. Her look amused me. She was engaged in making signals

to Charles at her side to observe the little curate's curious sleeve-links. I glanced at them, and saw at once they were a singular possession for so unobtrusive a person. They consisted each of a short gold bar for one arm of the link, fastened by a tiny chain of the same material to what seemed to my tolerably experienced eye—a first-rate diamond. Pretty big diamonds, too, and of remarkable shape, brilliancy, and cutting. In a moment I knew what Amelia meant. She owned a diamond *rivière*, said to be of Indian origin, but short by two stones for the circumference of her tolerably ample neck. Now, she had long been wanting two diamonds like these to match her set; but owing to the unusual shape and antiquated cutting of her own gems, she had never been able to complete the necklet, at least without removing an extravagant amount from a much larger stone of the first water.

The Scotch lassie's eyes caught Amelia's at the same time, and she broke into a pretty smile of good-humoured amusement. 'Taken in another person, Dick, dear!' she exclaimed, in her breezy way, turning to her husband. 'Lady Vandrift is observing your diamond sleeve-links.'

'They're very fine gems,' Amelia observed incautiously. (A most unwise admission if she desired to buy them.)

But the pleasant little curate was too transparently simple a soul to take advantage of her slip of judgment. 'They *are* good stones,' he replied; 'very

good stones—considering. They're not diamonds at all, to tell you the truth. They're best old-fashioned Oriental paste. My great-grandfather bought them, after the siege of Seringapatam, for a few rupees, from a Sepoy who had looted them from Tippoo Sultan's palace. He thought, like you, he had got a good thing. But it turned out, when they came to be examined by experts, they were only paste—very wonderful paste; it is supposed they had even imposed upon Tippoo himself, so fine is the imitation. But they are worth—well, say, fifty shillings at the utmost.'

While he spoke Charles looked at Amelia, and Amelia looked at Charles. Their eyes spoke volumes. The *rivière* was also supposed to have come from Tippoo's collection. Both drew at once an identical conclusion. These were two of the same stones, very likely torn apart and disengaged from the rest in the *mêlée* at the capture of the Indian palace.

'Can you take them off?' Sir Charles asked blandly. He spoke in the tone that indicates business.

'Certainly,' the little curate answered, smiling. 'I'm accustomed to taking them off. They're always noticed. They've been kept in the family ever since the siege, as a sort of valueless heirloom, for the sake of the picturesqueness of the story, you know; and nobody ever sees them without asking, as you do, to examine them closely. They deceive

even experts at first. But they're paste, all the same ; unmitigated Oriental paste, for all that.'

He took them both off, and handed them to Charles. No man in England is a finer judge of gems than my brother-in-law. I watched him narrowly. He examined them close, first with the naked eye, then with the little pocket-lens which he always carries. 'Admirable imitation,' he muttered, passing them on to Amelia. 'I'm not surprised they should impose upon inexperienced observers.'

But from the tone in which he said it, I could see at once he had satisfied himself they were real gems of unusual value. I know Charles's way of doing business so well. His glance to Amelia meant, 'These are the very stones you have so long been in search of.'

The Scotch lassie laughed a merry laugh. 'He sees through them now, Dick,' she cried. 'I felt sure Sir Charles would be a judge of diamonds.'

Amelia turned them over. I know Amelia, too ; and I knew from the way Amelia looked at them that she meant to have them. And when Amelia means to have anything, people who stand in the way may just as well spare themselves the trouble of opposing her.

They were beautiful diamonds. We found out afterwards the little curate's account was quite correct : these stones *had* come from the same necklet as Amelia's *rivière*, made for a favourite wife of Tippoo's, who had presumably as expansive personal charms

as our beloved sister-in-law's. More perfect diamonds have seldom been seen. They have excited the universal admiration of thieves and connoisseurs. Amelia told me afterwards that, according to legend, a Sepoy stole the necklet at the sack of the palace, and then fought with another for it. It was believed that two stones got spilt in the scuffle, and were picked up and sold by a third person—a looker-on—who had no idea of the value of his booty. Amelia had been hunting for them for several years to complete her necklet.

'They are excellent paste,' Sir Charles observed, handing them back. 'It takes a first-rate judge to detect them from the reality. Lady Vandrift has a necklet much the same in character, but composed of genuine stones; and as these are so much like them, and would complete her set, to all outer appearance, I wouldn't mind giving you, say, £10 for the pair of them.'

Mrs. Brabazon looked delighted. 'Oh, sell them to him, Dick,' she cried, 'and buy me a brooch with the money! A pair of common links would do for you just as well. Ten pounds for two paste stones! It's quite a lot of money.'

She said it so sweetly, with her pretty Scotch accent, that I couldn't imagine how Dick had the heart to refuse her. But he did, all the same.

'No, Jess, darling,' he answered. 'They're worthless, I know; but they have for me a certain sentimental value, as I've often told you. My dear

mother wore them, while she lived, as ear-rings ; and as soon as she died I had them set as links in order that I might always keep them about me. Besides, they have historical and family interest. Even a worthless heirloom, after all, *is* an heirloom.'

Dr. Hector Macpherson looked across and intervened. 'There is a part of my concession,' he said, 'where we have reason to believe a perfect new Kimberley will soon be discovered. If at any time you would care, Sir Charles, to look at my diamonds—when I get them—it would afford me the greatest pleasure in life to submit them to your consideration.'

Sir Charles could stand it no longer. 'Sir,' he said, gazing across at him with his sternest air, 'if your concession were as full of diamonds as Sindbad the Sailor's valley, I would not care to turn my head to look at them. I am acquainted with the nature and practice of salting.' And he glared at the man with the overhanging eyebrows as if he would devour him raw. Poor Dr. Hector Macpherson subsided instantly. We learnt a little later that he was a harmless lunatic, who went about the world with successive concessions for ruby mines and platinum reefs, because he had been ruined and driven mad by speculations in the two, and now recouped himself by imaginary grants in Burmah and Brazil, or anywhere else that turned up handy. And his eyebrows, after all, were of Nature's handicraft. We were sorry for the incident ; but a man in Sir Charles's position is such a mark for rogues that, if he did not take

means to protect himself promptly, he would be for ever overrun by them.

When we went up to our *salon* that evening, Amelia flung herself on the sofa. 'Charles,' she broke out in the voice of a tragedy queen, 'those are



CHARLES, I SHALL NEVER BE HAPPY AGAIN TILL I GET THEM.

real diamonds, and I shall never be happy again till I get them.'

'They are real diamonds,' Charles echoed. 'And you shall have them, Amelia. They're worth not less than three thousand pounds. But I shall bid them up gently.'

So, next day, Charles set to work to higgler with

the curate. Brabazon, however, didn't care to part with them. He was no money-grubber, he said. He cared more for his mother's gift and a family tradition than for a hundred pounds, if Sir Charles were to offer it. Charles's eye gleamed. 'But if I give you *two* hundred!' he said insinuatingly. 'What opportunities for good! You could build a new wing to your village school-house!'

'We have ample accommodation,' the curate answered. 'No, I don't think I'll sell them.'

Still, his voice faltered somewhat, and he looked down at them inquiringly.

Charles was too precipitate.

'A hundred pounds more or less matters little to me,' he said; 'and my wife has set her heart on them. It's every man's duty to please his wife—isn't it, Mrs. Brabazon?—I offer you three hundred.'

The little Scotch girl clasped her hands.

'Three hundred pounds! Oh, Dick, just think what fun we could have, and what good we could do with it! Do let him have them.'

Her accent was irresistible. But the curate shook his head.

'Impossible,' he answered. 'My dear mother's ear-rings! Uncle Aubrey would be so angry if he knew I'd sold them. I daren't face Uncle Aubrey.'

'Has he expectations from Uncle Aubrey?' Sir Charles asked of White Heather.

Mrs. Brabazon laughed. 'Uncle Aubrey! Oh, dear, no. Poor dear old Uncle Aubrey! Why, the

darling old soul hasn't a penny to bless himself with, except his pension. He's a retired post captain.' And she laughed melodiously. She was a charming woman.

'Then I should disregard Uncle Aubrey's feelings,' Sir Charles said decisively.

'No, no,' the curate answered. 'Poor dear old Uncle Aubrey! I wouldn't do anything for the world to annoy him. And he'd be sure to notice it.'

We went back to Amelia. 'Well, have you got them?' she asked.

'No,' Sir Charles answered. 'Not yet. But he's coming round, I think. He's hesitating now. Would rather like to sell them himself, but is afraid what "Uncle Aubrey" would say about the matter. His wife will talk him out of his needless consideration for Uncle Aubrey's feelings; and to-morrow we'll finally clench the bargain.'

Next morning we stayed late in our *salon*, where we always breakfasted, and did not come down to the public rooms till just before *déjeuner*, Sir Charles being busy with me over arrears of correspondence. When we *did* come down the *concierge* stepped forward with a twisted little feminine note for Amelia. She took it and read it. Her countenance fell. 'There, Charles,' she cried, handing it to him, 'you've let the chance slip. I shall *never* be happy now! They've gone off with the diamonds.'

Charles seized the note and read it. Then he passed it on to me. It was short, but final:—

' *Thursday, 6 a.m.*

'DEAR LADY VANDRIFT— *Will* you kindly excuse our having gone off hurriedly without bidding you good-bye? We have just had a horrid telegram to say that Dick's favourite sister is *dangerously* ill of



THE CONCIERGE STEPPED FORWARD WITH A LITTLE NOTE FOR AMELIA.

fever in Paris. I wanted to shake hands with you before we left—you have all been so sweet to us—but we go by the morning train, absurdly early, and I wouldn't for worlds disturb you. Perhaps some day we may meet again—though, buried as we are

in a North-country village, it isn't likely ; but in any case, you have secured the grateful recollection of
Yours very cordially, JESSIE BRABAZON.

'P.S.—Kindest regards to Sir Charles and those dear Wentworths, and a kiss for yourself, if I may venture to send you one.'

'She doesn't even mention where they've gone,' Amelia exclaimed, in a very bad humour.

'The *concierge* may know,' Isabel suggested, looking over my shoulder.

We asked at his office.

Yes, the gentleman's address was the Rev. Richard Peploe Brabazon, Holme Bush Cottage, Empingham, Northumberland.

Any address where letters might be sent at once, in Paris?

For the next ten days, or till further notice, Hôtel des Deux Mondes, Avenue de l'Opéra.

Amelia's mind was made up at once.

'Strike while the iron's hot,' she cried. 'This sudden illness, coming at the end of their honeymoon, and involving ten days' more stay at an expensive hotel, will probably upset the curate's budget. He'll be glad to sell now. You'll get them for three hundred. It was absurd of Charles to offer so much at first ; but offered once, of course we must stick to it.'

'What do you propose to do?' Charles asked. 'Write, or telegraph?'

'Oh, how silly men are!' Amelia cried. 'Is this the sort of business to be arranged by letter, still less by telegram? No. Seymour must start off at once, taking the night train to Paris; and the moment he gets there, he must interview the curate or Mrs. Brabazon. Mrs. Brabazon's the best. She has none of this stupid, sentimental nonsense about Uncle Aubrey.'

It is no part of a secretary's duties to act as a diamond broker. But when Amelia puts her foot down, she puts her foot down—a fact which she is unnecessarily fond of emphasising in that identical proposition. So the self-same evening saw me safe in the train on my way to Paris; and next morning I turned out of my comfortable sleeping-car at the Gare de Strasbourg. My orders were to bring back those diamonds, alive or dead, so to speak, in my pocket to Lucerne; and to offer any needful sum, up to two thousand five hundred pounds, for their immediate purchase.

When I arrived at the Deux Mondes I found the poor little curate and his wife both greatly agitated. They had sat up all night, they said, with their invalid sister; and the sleeplessness and suspense had certainly told upon them after their long railway journey. They were pale and tired, Mrs. Brabazon, in particular, looking ill and worried—too much like White Heather. I was more than half ashamed of bothering them about the diamonds at such a moment, but it occurred to me that Amelia was

probably right—they would now have reached the end of the sum set apart for their Continental trip, and a little ready cash might be far from unwelcome.

I broached the subject delicately. It was a fad of Lady Vandrift's, I said. She had set her heart upon those useless trinkets. And she wouldn't go without them. She must and would have them. But the curate was obdurate. He threw Uncle Aubrey still in my teeth. Three hundred?—no, never! A mother's present; impossible, dear Jessie! Jessie begged and prayed; she had grown really attached to Lady Vandrift, she said; but the curate wouldn't hear of it. I went up tentatively to four hundred. He shook his head gloomily. It wasn't a question of money, he said. It was a question of affection. I saw it was no use trying that tack any longer. I struck out a new line. 'These stones,' I said, 'I think I ought to inform you, are really diamonds. Sir Charles is certain of it. Now, is it right for a man of your profession and position to be wearing a pair of big gems like those, worth several hundred pounds, as ordinary sleeve-links? A woman?—yes, I grant you. But for a man, is it manly? And you a cricketer!'

He looked at me and laughed. 'Will nothing convince you?' he cried. 'They have been examined and tested by half a dozen jewellers, and we know them to be paste. It wouldn't be right of me to sell them to you under false pretences, however unwilling on my side. I *couldn't* do it.'

'Well, then,' I said, going up a bit in my bids to meet him, 'I'll put it like this. These gems are paste. But Lady Vandrift has an unconquerable and unaccountable desire to possess them. Money doesn't matter to her. She is a friend of your wife's. As a personal favour, won't you sell them to her for a thousand?'

He shook his head. 'It would be wrong,' he said,—'I might even add, criminal.'

'But we take all risk,' I cried.

He was absolute adamant. 'As a clergyman,' he answered, 'I feel I cannot do it.'

'Will *you* try, Mrs. Brabazon?' I asked.

The pretty little Scotchwoman leant over and whispered. She coaxed and cajoled him. Her ways were winsome. I couldn't hear what she said, but he seemed to give way at last. 'I should love Lady Vandrift to have them,' she murmured, turning to me. 'She *is* such a dear!' And she took out the links from her husband's cuffs and handed them across to me.

'How much?' I asked.

'Two thousand?' she answered, interrogatively. It was a big rise, all at once; but such are the ways of women.

'Done!' I replied. 'Do you consent?'

The curate looked up as if ashamed of himself.

'I consent,' he said slowly, 'since Jessie wishes it. But as a clergyman, and to prevent any future misunderstanding, I should like you to give me a

statement in writing that you buy them on my distinct and positive declaration that they are made of paste—old Oriental paste—not genuine stones, and that I do not claim any other qualities for them.'

I popped the gems into my purse, well pleased.



SHE TOOK OUT THE LINKS FROM HER HUSBAND'S CUFFS.

'Certainly,' I said, pulling out a paper. Charles, with his unerring business instinct, had anticipated the request, and given me a signed agreement to that effect.

'You will take a cheque?' I inquired.

He hesitated.

'Notes of the Bank of France would suit me better,' he answered.

'Very well,' I replied. 'I will go out and get them.'

How very unsuspecting some people are! He allowed me to go off—with the stones in my pocket!

Sir Charles had given me a blank cheque, not exceeding two thousand five hundred pounds. I took it to our agents and cashed it for notes of the Bank of France. The curate clasped them with pleasure. And right glad I was to go back to Lucerne that night, feeling that I had got those diamonds into my hands for about a thousand pounds under their real value!

At Lucerne railway station Amelia met me. She was positively agitated.

'Have you bought them, Seymour?' she asked.

'Yes,' I answered, producing my spoils in triumph.

'Oh, how dreadful!' she cried, drawing back. 'Do you think they're real? Are you sure he hasn't cheated you?'

'Certain of it,' I replied, examining them. 'No one can take me in, in the matter of diamonds. Why on earth should you doubt them?'

'Because I've been talking to Mrs. O'Hagan, at the hotel, and she says there's a well-known trick just like that—she's read of it in a book. A swindler has two sets—one real, one false; and he makes you

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buy the false ones by showing you the real, and pretending he sells them as a special favour.'

'You needn't be alarmed,' I answered. 'I am a judge of diamonds.'



HAVE YOU BOUGHT THEM, SEYMOUR?

'I shan't be satisfied,' Amelia murmured, 'till Charles has seen them.'

We went up to the hotel. For the first time in her life I saw Amelia really nervous as I handed the

stones to Charles to examine. Her doubt was contagious. I half feared, myself, he might break out into a deep monosyllabic interjection, losing his temper in haste, as he often does when things go wrong. But he looked at them with a smile, while I told him the price.

'Eight hundred pounds less than their value,' he answered, well satisfied.

'You have no doubt of their reality?' I asked.

'Not the slightest,' he replied, gazing at them. 'They are genuine stones, precisely the same in quality and type as Amelia's necklet.'

Amelia drew a sigh of relief. 'I'll go upstairs,' she said slowly, 'and bring down my own for you both to compare with them.'

One minute later she rushed down again, breathless. Amelia is far from slim, and I never before knew her exert herself so actively.

'Charles, Charles!' she cried, 'do you know what dreadful thing has happened? Two of my own stones are gone. He's stolen a couple of diamonds from my necklet, and sold them back to me.'

She held out the *rivière*. It was all too true. Two gems were missing—and these two just fitted the empty places!

A light broke in upon me. I clapped my hand to my head. 'By Jove,' I exclaimed, 'the little curate is—Colonel Clay!'

Charles clapped his own hand to his brow in turn. 'And Jessie,' he cried, 'White Heather—that

innocent little Scotchwoman! I often detected a familiar ring in her voice, in spite of the charming Highland accent. Jessie is—Madame Picardet!’

We had absolutely no evidence; but, like the Commissary at Nice, we felt instinctively sure of it.

Sir Charles was determined to catch the rogue. This second deception put him on his mettle. ‘The worst of the man is,’ he said, ‘he has a method. He doesn’t go out of his way to cheat us; he makes us go out of ours to be cheated. He lays a trap, and we tumble headlong into it. To-morrow, Sey, we must follow him on to Paris.’

Amelia explained to him what Mrs. O’Hagan had said. Charles took it all in at once, with his usual sagacity. ‘That explains,’ he said, ‘why the rascal used this particular trick to draw us on by. If we had suspected him he could have shown the diamonds were real, and so escaped detection. It was a blind to draw us off from the fact of the robbery. He went to Paris to be out of the way when the discovery was made, and to get a clear day’s start of us. What a consummate rogue! And to do me twice running!’

‘How did he get at my jewel-case, though?’ Amelia exclaimed.

‘That’s the question,’ Charles answered. ‘You *do* leave it about so!’

‘And why didn’t he steal the whole *rivière* at once, and sell the gems?’ I inquired.

‘Too cunning,’ Charles replied. ‘This was much better business. It isn’t easy to dispose of a big

thing like that. In the first place, the stones are large and valuable ; in the second place, they're well known—every dealer has heard of the Vandrift *rivière*, and seen pictures of the shape of them. They're marked gems, so to speak. No, he played a better game—took a couple of them off, and offered them to the only one person on earth who was likely to buy them without suspicion. He came here, meaning to work this very trick ; he had the links made right to the shape beforehand, and then he stole the stones and slipped them into their places. It's a wonderfully clever trick. Upon my soul, I almost admire the fellow.'

For Charles is a business man himself, and can appreciate business capacity in others.

How Colonel Clay came to know about that necklet, and to appropriate two of the stones, we only discovered much later. I will not here anticipate that disclosure. One thing at a time is a good rule in life. For the moment he succeeded in baffling us altogether.

However, we followed him on to Paris, telegraphing beforehand to the Bank of France to stop the notes. It was all in vain. They had been cashed within half an hour of my paying them. The curate and his wife, we found, quitted the *Hôtel des Deux Mondes* for parts unknown that same afternoon. And, as usual with Colonel Clay, they vanished into space, leaving no clue behind them. In other words, they changed their disguise, no doubt, and

reappeared somewhere else that night in altered characters. At any rate, no such person as the Reverend Richard Peploe Brabazon was ever afterwards heard of—and, for the matter of that, no such village exists as Empingham, Northumberland.

We communicated the matter to the Parisian police. They were *most* unsympathetic. 'It is no doubt Colonel Clay,' said the official whom we saw; 'but you seem to have little just ground of complaint against him. As far as I can see, messieurs, there is not much to choose between you. You, Monsieur le Chevalier, desired to buy diamonds at the price of paste. You, madame, feared you had bought paste at the price of diamonds. You, monsieur the secretary, tried to get the stones from an unsuspecting person for half their value. He took you all in, that brave Colonel Caoutchouc—it was diamond cut diamond.'

Which was true, no doubt, but by no means consoling.

We returned to the Grand Hotel. Charles was fuming with indignation. 'This is really too much,' he exclaimed. 'What an audacious rascal! But he will never again take me in, my dear Sey. I only hope he'll try it on. I should love to catch him. I'd know him another time, I'm sure, in spite of his disguises. It's absurd my being tricked twice running like this. But never again while I live! Never again, I declare to you!'

'*Jamais de la vie!*' a courier in the hall close by

murmured responsive. We stood under the verandah of the Grand Hotel, in the big glass courtyard. And I verily believe that courier was really Colonel Clay himself in one of his disguises.

But perhaps we were beginning to suspect him everywhere.

III

THE EPISODE OF THE OLD MASTER

LIKE most South Africans, Sir Charles Vandrift is anything but sedentary. He hates sitting down. He must always 'trek.' He cannot live without moving about freely. Six weeks in Mayfair at a time is as much as he can stand. Then he must run away incontinently for rest and change to Scotland, Homburg, Monte Carlo, Biarritz. 'I won't be a limpet on the rock,' he says. Thus it came to pass that in the early autumn we found ourselves stopping at the Métropole at Brighton. We were the accustomed nice little family party—Sir Charles and Amelia, myself and Isabel, with the suite as usual.

On the first Sunday morning after our arrival we strolled out, Charles and I—I regret to say during the hours allotted for Divine service—on to the King's Road, to get a whiff of fresh air, and a glimpse of the waves that were churning the Channel. The two ladies (with their bonnets) had gone to church; but Sir Charles had risen late, fatigued from the week's toil, while I myself was suffering from a

matutinal headache, which I attributed to the close air in the billiard-room overnight, combined, perhaps, with the insidious effect of a brand of soda-water to which I was little accustomed; I had used it to dilute my evening whisky. We were to meet our wives afterwards at the church parade—an institution to which I believe both Amelia and Isabel attach even greater importance than to the sermon which precedes it.

We sat down on a glass seat. Charles gazed inquiringly up and down the King's Road, on the look-out for a boy with Sunday papers. At last one passed. '*Observer*,' my brother-in-law called out laconically.

'Ain't got none,' the boy answered, brandishing his bundle in our faces. 'Ave a *Referree* or a *Pink 'Un* ?'

Charles, however, is not a Refereader, while as to the *Pink 'Un*, he considers it unsuitable for public perusal on Sunday morning. It may be read indoors, but in the open air its blush betrays it. So he shook his head, and muttered, 'If you pass an *Observer*, send him on here at once to me.'

A polite stranger who sat close to us turned round with a pleasant smile. 'Would you allow me to offer you one?' he said, drawing a copy from his pocket. 'I fancy I bought the last. There's a run on them to-day, you see. Important news this morning from the Transvaal.'

Charles raised his eyebrows, and accepted it, as I

thought, just a trifle grumpily. So, to remove the false impression his surliness might produce on so benevolent a mind, I entered into conversation with the polite stranger. He was a man of middle age, and medium height, with a cultivated air, and a pair of gold *pince-nez*; his eyes were sharp; his voice was refined; he dropped into talk before long about



distinguished people just then in Brighton. It was clear at once that he was hand in glove with many of the very best kind. We compared notes as to Nice, Rome, Florence, Cairo. Our new acquaintance had scores of friends in common with us, it seemed; indeed, our circles so largely coincided, that I wondered we had never happened till then to knock up against one another.

'And Sir Charles Vandrift, the great African millionaire,' he said at last, 'do you know anything of *him*? I'm told he's at present down here at the Métropole.'

I waved my hand towards the person in question.

'*This* is Sir Charles Vandrift,' I answered, with proprietary pride; 'and *I* am his brother-in-law, Mr. Seymour Wentworth.'

'Oh, indeed!' the stranger answered, with a curious air of drawing in his horns. I wondered whether he had just been going to pretend he knew Sir Charles, or whether perchance he was on the point of saying something highly uncomplimentary, and was glad to have escaped it.

By this time, however, Charles laid down the paper and chimed into our conversation. I could see at once from his mollified tone that the news from the Transvaal was favourable to his operations in Cloetedorp Golcondas. He was therefore in a friendly and affable temper. His whole manner changed at once. He grew polite in return to the polite stranger. Besides, we knew the man moved in the best society; he had acquaintances whom Amelia was most anxious to secure for her 'At Homes' in Mayfair—young Faith, the novelist, and Sir Richard Montrose, the great Arctic traveller. As for the painters, it was clear that he was sworn friends with the whole lot of them. He dined with Academicians, and gave weekly breakfasts to the members of the Institute. Now, Amelia is

particularly desirous that her *salon* should not be considered too exclusively financial and political in character: with a solid basis of M.P.'s and millionaires, she loves a delicate under-current of literature, art, and the musical glasses. Our new acquaintance was extremely communicative: 'Knows his place in society, Sey,' Sir Charles said to me afterwards, 'and is therefore not afraid of talking freely, as so many people are who have doubts about their position.' We exchanged cards before we rose. Our new friend's name turned out to be Dr. Edward Polperro.

'In practice here?' I inquired, though his garb belied it.

'Oh, not medical,' he answered. 'I am an LL.D. don't you know. I interest myself in art, and buy to some extent for the National Gallery.'

The very man for Amelia's 'At Homes'! Sir Charles snapped at him instantly. 'I've brought my four-in-hand down here with me,' he said, in his best friendly manner, 'and we think of tooling over to-morrow to Lewes. If you'd care to take a seat I'm sure Lady Vandrift would be charmed to see you.'

'You're very kind,' the Doctor said, 'on so casual an introduction. I'm sure I shall be delighted.'

'We start from the Métropole at ten-thirty,' Charles went on.

'I shall be there. Good morning!' And, with a satisfied smile, he rose and left us, nodding.

We returned to the lawn, to Amelia and Isabel.

Our new friend passed us once or twice. Charles stopped him and introduced him. He was walking with two ladies, most elegantly dressed in rather peculiar artistic dresses. Amelia was taken at first sight by his manner. 'One could see at a glance,' she said, 'he was a person of culture and of real distinction. I wonder whether he could bring the P.R.A. to my Parliamentary "At Home" on Wednesday fortnight?'

Next day, at ten-thirty, we started on our drive. Our team has been considered the best in Sussex. Charles is an excellent, though somewhat anxious—or, might I say better, somewhat careful?—whip. He finds the management of two leaders and two wheelers fills his hands for the moment, both literally and figuratively, leaving very little time for general conversation. Lady Belleisle of Beacon bloomed beside him on the box (her bloom is perennial, and applied by her maid); Dr. Polperro occupied the seat just behind with myself and Amelia. The Doctor talked most of the time to Lady Vandrift: his discourse was of picture-galleries, which Amelia detests, but in which she thinks it incumbent upon her, as Sir Charles's wife, to affect now and then a cultivated interest. *Noblesse oblige*; and the walls of Castle Seldon, our place in Ross-shire, are almost covered now with Leaders and with Orchardsons. This result was first arrived at by a singular accident. Sir Charles wanted a leader—for his coach, you understand—and told an artistic friend so. The

artistic friend brought him a *Leader* next week with a capital L; and Sir Charles was so taken aback that he felt ashamed to confess the error. So he was turned unawares into a patron of painting.

Dr. Polperro, in spite of his too pronouncedly artistic talk, proved on closer view a most agreeable companion. He diversified his art cleverly with anecdotes and scandals; he told us exactly which famous painters had married their cooks, and which had only married their models; and otherwise showed himself a most diverting talker. Among other things, however, he happened to mention once that he had recently discovered a genuine Rembrandt—a quite undoubted Rembrandt, which had remained for years in the keeping of a certain obscure Dutch family. It had always been allowed to be a masterpiece of the painter, but it had seldom been seen for the last half-century save by a few intimate acquaintances. It was a portrait of one Maria Vanrenen of Haarlem, and he had bought it of her descendants at Gouda, in Holland.

I saw Charles prick up his ears, though he took no open notice. This Maria Vanrenen, as it happened, was a remote collateral ancestress of the Vandrifts, before they emigrated to the Cape in 1780; and the existence of the portrait, though not its whereabouts, was well known in the family. Isabel had often mentioned it. If it was to be had at anything like a reasonable price, it would be a splendid thing for the boys (Sir Charles, I ought to

say, has two sons at Eton) to possess an undoubted portrait of an ancestress by Rembrandt.

Dr. Polperro talked a good deal after that about this valuable find. He had tried to sell it at first to the National Gallery; but though the Directors admired the work immensely, and admitted its genuineness, they regretted that the funds at their disposal this year did not permit them to acquire so important a canvas at a proper figure. South Kensington again was too poor; but the Doctor was in treaty at present with the Louvre and with Berlin. Still, it was a pity a fine work of art like that, once brought into the country, should be allowed to go out of it. Some patriotic patron of the fine arts ought to buy it for his own house, or else munificently present it to the nation.

All the time Charles said nothing. But I could feel him cogitating. He even looked behind him once, near a difficult corner (while the guard was actually engaged in tootling his horn to let passers-by know that the coach was coming), and gave Amelia a warning glance to say nothing committing, which had at once the requisite effect of sealing her mouth for the moment. It is a very unusual thing for Charles to look back while driving. I gathered from his doing so that he was inordinately anxious to possess this Rembrandt.

When we arrived at Lewes we put up our horses at the inn, and Charles ordered a lunch on his wonted scale of princely magnificence. Mean-

while we wandered, two and two, about the town and castle. I annexed Lady Belleisle, who is at least amusing. Charles drew me aside before starting. 'Look here, Sey,' he said, 'we must be *very* careful. This man, Polperro, is a chance acquaintance. There's nothing an astute rogue can take one in over more easily than an Old Master If the Rembrandt is genuine I ought to have it; if it really represents Maria Vanrenen, it's a duty I owe to the boys to buy it. But I've been done twice lately, and I won't be done a third time. We must go to work cautiously.'

'You are right,' I answered. 'No more seers and curates!'

'If this man's an impostor,' Charles went on—'and in spite of what he says about the National Gallery and so forth, we know nothing of him—the story he tells is just the sort of one such a fellow would trump up in a moment to deceive me. He could easily learn who I was—I'm a well-known figure; he knew I was in Brighton, and he may have been sitting on that glass seat on Sunday on purpose to entrap me.'

'He introduced your name,' I said, 'and the moment he found out who I was he plunged into talk with me.'

'Yes,' Charles continued. 'He may have learned about the portrait of Maria Vanrenen, which my grandmother always said was preserved at Gouda; and, indeed, I myself have often mentioned it, as you

doubtless remember. If so, what more natural, say, for a rogue than to begin talking about the portrait in that innocent way to Amelia? If he wants a Rembrandt, I believe they can be turned out to order to any amount in Birmingham. The moral of all which is, it behoves us to be careful.'

'Right you are,' I answered; 'and I am keeping my eye upon him.'

We drove back by another road, overshadowed by beech-trees in autumnal gold. It was a delightful excursion. Dr. Polperro's heart was elated by lunch and the excellent dry Monopole. He talked amazingly. I never heard a man with a greater or more varied flow of anecdote. He had been everywhere and knew all about everybody. Amelia booked him at once for her 'At Home' on Wednesday week, and he promised to introduce her to several artistic and literary celebrities.

That evening, however, about half-past seven, Charles and I strolled out together on the King's Road for a blow before dinner. We dine at eight. The air was delicious. We passed a small new hotel, very smart and exclusive, with a big bow window. There, in evening dress, lights burning and blind up, sat our friend, Dr. Polperro, with a lady facing him, young, graceful, and pretty. A bottle of champagne stood open before him. He was helping himself plentifully to hot-house grapes, and full of good humour. It was clear he and the lady were occupied in the intense enjoyment of some capital

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joke ; for they looked queerly at one another, and burst now and again into merry peals of laughter.

I drew back. So did Sir Charles. One idea passed at once through both our minds. I murmured, 'Colonel Clay!' He answered, '*And Madame Picardet!*'



THERE SAT OUR FRIEND, DR. POLPERRO.

They were not in the least like the Reverend Richard and Mrs. Brabazon. But that clinched the matter. Nor did I see a sign of the aquiline nose of the Mexican Seer. Still, I had learnt by then to discount appearances. If these were indeed the famous sharper and his wife or accomplice, we must be very careful. We were forewarned this time. Supposing he had the audacity to try a third trick

of the sort upon us we had him under our thumbs. Only, we must take steps to prevent his dexterously slipping through our fingers.

'He can wriggle like an eel,' said the Commissary at Nice. We both recalled those words, and laid our plans deep to prevent the man's wriggling away from us on this third occasion.

'I tell you what it is, Sey,' my brother-in-law said, with impressive slowness. 'This time we must deliberately lay ourselves out to be swindled. We must propose of our own accord to buy the picture, making him guarantee it in writing as a genuine Rembrandt, and taking care to tie him down by most stringent conditions. But we must seem at the same time to be unsuspecting and innocent as babes; we must swallow whole whatever lies he tells us; pay his price—nominally—by cheque for the portrait; and then, arrest him the moment the bargain is complete, with the proofs of his guilt then and there upon him. Of course, what he'll try to do will be to vanish into thin air at once, as he did at Nice and Paris; but, this time, we'll have the police in waiting and everything ready. We'll avoid precipitancy, but we'll avoid delay too. We must hold our hands off till he's actually accepted and pocketed the money; and then, we must nab him instantly, and walk him off to the local Bow Street. That's my plan of campaign. Meanwhile, we should appear all trustful innocence and confiding guilelessness.'

In pursuance of this well-laid scheme, we called

next day on Dr. Polperro at his hotel, and were introduced to his wife, a dainty little woman, in whom we affected not to recognise that arch Madame Picardet or that simple White Heather. The Doctor talked charmingly (as usual) about art—what a well-informed rascal he was, to be sure!—and Sir Charles expressed some interest in the supposed Rembrandt. Our new friend was delighted; we could see by his well-suppressed eagerness of tone that he knew us at once for probable purchasers. He would run up to town next day, he said, and bring down the portrait. And in effect, when Charles and I took our wonted places in the Pullman next morning, on our way up to the half-yearly meeting of Cloetedorp Golcondas, there was our Doctor, leaning back in his arm-chair as if the car belonged to him. Charles gave me an expressive look. 'Does it in style,' he whispered, 'doesn't he? Takes it out of my five thousand; or discounts the amount he means to chouse me of with his spurious Rembrandt.'

Arrived in town, we went to work at once. We set a private detective from Marvillier's to watch our friend; and from him we learned that the so-called Doctor dropped in for a picture that day at a dealer's in the West-end (I suppress the name, having a judicious fear of the law of libel ever before my eyes), a dealer who was known to be mixed up before then in several shady or disreputable transactions. Though, to be sure, my experience has been that picture dealers are—picture dealers. Horses

rank first in my mind as begetters and producers of unscrupulous agents, but pictures run them a very good second. Anyhow, we found out that our distinguished art-critic picked up his Rembrandt at this dealer's shop, and came down with it in his care the same night to Brighton.



IN HIS JUDGMENT, IT WAS NOT A REMBRANDT AT ALL.

In order not to act precipitately, and so ruin our plans, we induced Dr. Polperro (what a cleverly chosen name!) to bring the Rembrandt round to the Métropole for our inspection, and to leave it with us while we got the opinion of an expert from London.

The expert came down, and gave us a full report upon the alleged Old Master. In his judgment, it

was not a Rembrandt at all, but a cunningly-painted and well-begrimed modern Dutch imitation. Moreover, he showed us by documentary evidence that the real portrait of Maria Vanrenen had, as a matter of fact, been brought to England five years before, and sold to Sir J. H. Tomlinson, the well-known connoisseur, for eight thousand pounds. Dr. Polperro's picture was, therefore, at best either a replica by Rembrandt; or else, more probably, a copy by a pupil; or, most likely of all, a mere modern forgery.

We were thus well prepared to fasten our charge of criminal conspiracy upon the self-styled Doctor. But in order to make assurance still more certain, we threw out vague hints to him that the portrait of Maria Vanrenen might really be elsewhere, and even suggested in his hearing that it might not improbably have got into the hands of that omnivorous collector, Sir J. H. Tomlinson. But the vendor was proof against all such attempts to decry his goods. He had the effrontery to brush away the documentary evidence, and to declare that Sir J. H. Tomlinson (one of the most learned and astute picture-buyers in England) had been smartly imposed upon by a needy Dutch artist with a talent for forgery. The real Maria Vanrenen, he declared and swore, was the one he offered us. 'Success has turned the man's head,' Charles said to me, well pleased. 'He thinks we will swallow any obvious lie he chooses to palm off upon us. But the bucket has come once too often to the well. This time we checkmate him.' It

was a mixed metaphor, I admit ; but Sir Charles's tropes are not always entirely superior to criticism.

So we pretended to believe our man, and accepted his assurances. Next came the question of price. This was warmly debated, for form's sake only. Sir J. H. Tomlinson had paid eight thousand for his genuine Maria. The Doctor demanded ten thousand for his spurious one. There was really no reason why we should higgie and dispute, for Charles meant merely to give his cheque for the sum and then arrest the fellow ; but, still, we thought it best for the avoidance of suspicion to make a show of resistance ; and we at last beat him down to nine thousand guineas. For this amount he was to give us a written warranty that the work he sold us was a genuine Rembrandt, that it represented Maria Vanrenen of Haarlem, and that he had bought it direct, without doubt or question, from that good lady's descendants at Gouda, in Holland.

It was capitally done. We arranged the thing to perfection. We had a constable in waiting in our rooms at the Métropole, and we settled that Dr. Polperro was to call at the hotel at a certain fixed hour to sign the warranty 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 Peploe 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 realised 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 Peploe 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,



IT'S ALL RIGHT, MY MAN, HE SAID.

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 personation. My belief is, though, they're a pair of escaped lunatics.'

'We'll 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.

We were half afraid even now the fellow would manage somehow to get out on bail and give us the slip in spite of everything; and, indeed, he protested in the most violent manner against the treatment to which we were subjecting 'a gentleman in his position.' But Charles took care to tell the police it was all right; that he was a dangerous and peculiarly slippery criminal, and that on no account must they let him go on any pretext whatever, till he had been properly examined before the magistrates.

We learned at the hotel that night, curiously enough, that there really *was* a Dr. Polperro, a distinguished art critic, whose name, we didn't doubt, our impostor had been assuming.

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 C.B. and LL.D., very highly respected. 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. He's been locked up all night on your mistaken affidavits, and, naturally enough, he's mad with anger.'

'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. He made my acquaintance, unasked, on a glass seat on the King's Road; invited me to go on his coach to Lewes; volunteered to buy a valuable picture of me; and then, at the last moment, unaccountably gave me in charge on this silly and preposterous trumped-up accusation. 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's 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. So that was the end of our well-planned attempt to arrest the swindler.

Not quite the end, however ; for, of course, after this, the whole affair got by degrees into the papers. 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 paragraphs got about. The *World* showed us up in a sarcastic article ; and *Truth*, which has always been terribly severe upon Sir Charles and all the other South Africans, had a pungent set of verses on 'High Art in Kimberley.' By this means, as we suppose, the affair became known to Colonel Clay himself ; for 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 !

'Bless your ingenuous little heart ! 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,



A CHEERFUL, LITTLE NOTE.

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. So you actually imagined a man of my brains would condescend to anything so flat and stale as the silly and threadbare Old Master deception! And this in the so-called nineteenth century! *O sancta simplicitas!* 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 PEPLOE 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. I shall withdraw altogether from this worrying life. I shall retire from a scheming and polluted world to some untainted spot in the fresh, pure mountains.'

'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. Césarine 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. She walks the world with a needle-case in one hand and an etna in the other. She can cook an omelette on occasion, or drive a Norwegian cariole; she can sew, and knit, and make dresses, and cure a cold, and do anything else on earth you ask her. Her salads are the most savoury I ever tasted; while as for her coffee (which she prepares

for us in the train on long journeys), there isn't a *chef de cuisine* at a West-end club to be named in the same day with her.

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

'Is he . . . an archduke?' Amelia asked, a little staggered at such apparent familiarity with Imperial personages.

'*Ma foi!* no, madame. He is an hotel—as you would say in England, the "Victoria" or the "Prince of Wales's"—the most comfortable hotel in all South Tyrol; and at this time of year, naturally, you must go beyond the Alps; it begins already to be cold at Innsbruck.'

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; terraced vineyard slopes; old walls and towers; quaint, arcaded streets; a craggy waterfall; a promenade after the fashion of a German Spa; and when you lift your eyes from the ground, jagged summits of Dolomites: it was a combination such as I had never before beheld; a Rhine town plumped down among green Alpine heights, and threaded by the cool colonnades of Italy.

I approved Césarine's choice; and I was

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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. As in any case I have



MERCI, MONSIEUR !

to do three hours' work a day, I feel that such additions to my normal burden may well be spared me. I tipped Césarine half a sovereign, in fact, for her judicious choice. Césarine glanced at it on her palm in her mysterious, curious, half-smiling way, and pocketed it at once with a 'Merci, monsieur !'

that had a touch of contempt in it. I always fancy Césarine has large ideas of her own on the subject of tipping, and thinks very small beer of the modest sums a mere secretary can alone afford to bestow upon her.

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. A statistical eye, it is supposed, can count no fewer than forty of these picturesque, ramshackled old castles from a point on the Küchelberg. For myself, I hate statistics (except as an element in financial prospectuses), and I really don't know how many ruinous piles Isabel and Amelia counted under Césarine's guidance; but I remember that most of them were quaint and beautiful, and that their variety of architecture seemed positively bewildering. 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. He loves the picturesque, and has a poet hidden in that financial soul of his. (Very effectually hidden, though, I am ready to grant you.) From the moment he came he felt at once he would love to possess a castle of his own among these romantic mountains. 'Seldon!' he exclaimed contemptuously. 'They call Seldon a castle! But you and I know very well, Sey, it

was built in 1860, with sham antique stones, for Macpherson of Seldon, at market rates, by Cubitt and Co., worshipful contractors of London. Macpherson charged me for that sham antiquity a preposterous price, at which one ought to procure a real ancestral mansion. 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 *Baedeker*.) 'That's the sort of place for *me!*—tenth or eleventh century. I could live here, remote from stocks and shares, for ever; and in these sequestered glens, recollect, Sey, my boy, there are no Colonel Clays, and no arch Madame Picardets!'

As a matter of fact, he could have lived there six weeks, and then tired for Park Lane, Monte Carlo, Brighton.

As for Amelia, strange to say, she was equally taken with this new fad of Charles's. 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 scandalised face of Mayfair and Belgravia. She bores herself to death even at Seldon Castle, Ross-shire, and yawns all day long in Paris or Vienna. She is a confirmed Cockney. Yet, for some occult reason, my amiable sister-in-law fell in love with South Tyrol. She wanted to vegetate in that lush vegetation. The grapes were being picked; pumpkins hung over the walls; Virginia creeper draped

the quaint gray schlosses with crimson cloaks ; and everything was as beautiful as a dream of Burne-Jones's. (I know I am quite right in mentioning Burne-Jones, especially in connection with Romanesque architecture, because I heard him highly praised on that very ground by our friend and enemy, Dr. Edward Polperro.) So perhaps it was excusable that Amelia should fall in love with it all, under the circumstances ; besides, she is largely influenced by what Césarine says, and Césarine declares there is no climate in Europe like Meran in winter. I do not agree with her. The sun sets behind the hills at three in the afternoon, and a nasty warm wind blows moist over the snow in January and February.

However, Amelia set Césarine to inquire of the people at the hotel about the market price of tumble-down ruins, and the number of such eligible family mausoleums just then for sale in the immediate neighbourhood. Césarine returned with a full, true, and particular list, adorned with flowers of rhetoric which would have delighted the soul of good old John Robins. They were all picturesque, all Romanesque, all richly ivy-clad, all commodious, all historical, and all the property of high well-born Grafts and very honourable Freiherrns. Most of them had been the scene of celebrated tournaments ; 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 Lebenstein. We drove past both, and even I myself, I confess, was



CÉSARINE RETURNED WITH A FULL, TRUE, AND PARTICULAR LIST.

distinctly taken with them. (Besides, when a big purchase like this is on the stocks, a poor beggar of a secretary has always a chance of exerting his influence and earning for himself some modest commission.) Schloss Planta was the most striking externally, I should say, with its Rhine-like towers,

and its great gnarled ivy-stems, that looked as if they antedated the House of Hapsburg ; but Lebenstein was said to be better preserved within, and more fitted in every way for modern occupation. Its staircase has been photographed by 7000 amateurs.

We got tickets to view. The invaluable Césarine procured them for us. Armed with these, we drove off one fine afternoon, meaning to go to Planta, by Césarine's recommendation. Half-way there, however, we changed our minds, as it was such a lovely day, and went on up the long, slow hill to Lebenstein. I must say the drive through the grounds was simply charming. The castle stands perched (say rather poised, like St. Michael the archangel in Italian pictures) on a solitary stack or crag of rock, looking down on every side upon its own rich vineyards. Chestnuts line the glens ; the valley of the Etsch spreads below like a picture.

The vineyards alone make a splendid estate, by the way ; they produce a delicious red wine, which is exported to Bordeaux, and there bottled and sold as a vintage claret under the name of Château Monnivet. Charles revelled in the idea of growing his own wines.

'Here we could sit,' he cried to Amelia, 'in the most literal sense, under our own vine and fig-tree. Delicious retirement ! For my part, I'm sick and tired of the hubbub of Threadneedle Street.'

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

knocker. So deliciously mediæval! The late Graf Von Lebenstein had recently died, we knew; and his son, the present Count, a young man of means, having inherited from his mother's family a still more ancient and splendid schloss in the Salzburg district, desired to sell this outlying estate in order to afford himself a yacht, after the manner that is now becoming increasingly fashionable with the noblemen and gentlemen in Germany and Austria.

The door was opened for us by a high well-born menial, attired in a very ancient and honourable livery. Nice antique hall; suits of ancestral armour, trophies of Tyrolese 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 title spells money in England.

He was right in his surmise. Two minutes later