

THE SCHEMES OF COLONEL CLAY

BEING EPISODES IN THE LIFE OF A MASTER ROGUE

BY GRANT ALLEN

The Mexican Seer

This is the first of a series of stories to run each week in The Sunday Oregonian. They are intensely interesting, very original in theme, and certain to hold the reader's attention. While they are complete in themselves, each story is complete in itself.

MY NAME is Seymour Wilbraham Wentworth. I am a brother-in-law and secretary to Sir Charles Vandrift, the South African millionaire and famous financier. Many years ago, when Charles 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 Cleopatra Colomand, 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 picture of a sharp and successful business genius. I have known only one rogue impose upon Sir Charles, and that one rogue, as the Commissioner of Police at Nice remarked, would doubtless have imposed upon a syndicate of Vidocq, Robert Houdin and Cagliostro.

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 at 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 refreshes 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 faded 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 "Hotel des Anglais." We had capital quarters on the first floor—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 who had for years adored without his knowledge. Of course, Sir Charles didn't believe a word of it; but his curiosity was aroused; he wished to see and judge for himself of the wonderful thought reader.

What would be his terms, do you think, for a private seance? 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 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 seance at once in my rooms, without mentioning who I am to him; keep the name 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 Seer can tell us."

I went as directed. I found the Seer a very remarkable and interesting person. He stood about Sir Charles' own height, but was, with straighter, with an aquiline nose, strangely piercing, very large black pupils, and a finely chiseled, close-shaven face, like the bust of Antinous in our hall in Mayfair.

What gave him the 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 seance 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."

Senior Antonio Herrera—that was what he called himself—bowed to me with impressive Spanish politeness. His dark 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, embroidered, with a crimson ribbon, wrapped a cloak round his shoulders, lighted a cigarette, and strode forth by my side toward the Hotel 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 Angels!" he said—and I may mention in passing that his English, in spite of

a slight southern accent, was idiomatic and excellent. "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 ploy.

We went upstairs to our rooms. Charles had gathered together a few friends to watch the performance. The Seer entered, wrapped in thought. He was in evening dress, but a red sash round his waist gave a touch of picturesqueness and a dash of color. He paused for a moment

of Good Hope; Jansenville; De Witt street, 1849."

"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. "I'll be reached the door. He didn't even know to what hotel I was plotting him."

The Seer stroked his chin softly. His eyes 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."

Senior Herrera disappeared. Sir Charles he was half afraid, even then, Senior Herrera would read it.

I fanned, too, he glanced somewhat anxiously toward Mrs. Picardet. The Seer bowed courteously. "Your will, senior, is law," he said. "I make it a principle, though I can see through all things, invariably to respect the secrets and sanctities. If it were not so I might dissolve society. For which of us is there who can bear the whole truth being told about him?" He gazed around the room. An unpleasant thrill super-vened. 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

ing 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 some of us were engaged in financial operations.

"Look at it long," the Seer said, from

thing 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-soma 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 paragon with a very good grace, sipped his coffee in a corner, and chatted to the lady who had suggested Stratford with marked politeness. He was a polished gentleman.

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

"What of Mrs. 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 I 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

looks like your own handwriting, Charles—not a clever forgery."

"It is," he said. "I admit it—I can't deny it. Only 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 catchwords, but I never occurred to me he was going to victimize me financially in this way. I expected attempts at a loan or extortion, but to collar my signature to a blank check—stoutrious!"

"How did he manage it?" I asked.

"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 check?"

"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 recalcitrant 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 victimized right here by Colonel Clay, gentlemen."

"Who is Colonel Clay?" Charles asked.

"That is 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 indiarubber face and he can mold 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 mold his own nose and cheeks, with wax additions, to the character he desires to personate. Aquiline, this time, you say. He! Anything like these photographs?" He rummaged in his desk and handed us two.

"Not in the least!" Sir Charles answered. "Except perhaps, at the neck, everything here is quite unlike him."

"Then that's the Colonel!" the commissary answered, 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. 'That's the Colonel in his simple disguise. Very good. Now watch me. Figure to yourself that he dyes his hair with wax to his nose—an aquiline nose—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 bored-fishy."

"That's so," the commissary answered. "A drop of belladonna expands—and produces the Seneca. Five grains of opium contract and give a dead-alive, stupid, 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.

"Yet better," 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 effecting the arrest of the culprit."

We telegraphed to London, of course, and we wrote to the Seer 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 the monsieur your secretary went out to fetch Senior Herrera that night, Senior Herrera didn't know to whose rooms he was coming. Quite otherwise, in point of fact. I do not doubt myself that Senior 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. 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 Mrs. Picardet, I think. He induced several ladies of your circle to attend his seances. She and they spoke to you about him and aroused your curiosity. You may be sure that when he came to this room, he came ready primed and prepared with endless facts about both of you."

"What four or five have been, Sey?" my brother-in-law exclaimed. "I see it all now. That designing woman sent around 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 printed on both his arms, and he had made other preparations of still greater importance."

"You mean the check. Well, how did he get it?"

The commissary opened the door. "Come in," he said. And a young man entered whom we recognized at once as the chief clerk in the foreign department of the Crédit Mobilier, the principal bank all along the Riviera.

"State what you know of this check," the commissary said, showing it to him. For he had asked if it 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 Messrs. Drummond & Rotherberg, Limited.

"Quite right," Sir Charles murmured.

"Two days later a lady, Mme.

(Continued on Page 5.)



"WOULD YOU LIKE ME TO TELL YOU THE NUMBER OF THIS BANK NOTE IN THIS ENVELOPE?"

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, Mr. 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 recognize 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 Stratford. No, not Earl of Stratford; Seymour Wilbraham Wentworth. Then seems to be some connection in somebody's mind now present between Wentworth and Stratford. I am not English. I do not know what it means. But they are somehow the same name, Wentworth and Stratford."

He gazed around, apparently for confirmation. "Wentworth was the surname of the great Earl of Stratford," 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 of the fact. The 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

passed it around 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 gummied it down firmly.

The Seer returned. He kept eye 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. "A £5, 1858," he answered, in a slow tone. "A Bank of England note for £5—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 looking about. Still, it's capital conjuring."

"He can see through matter," one of the ladies interposed. It was Mrs. 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.

Senior Herrera gazed through it. "Three gold coins," he replied, knitting his brows with the effect of seeing into the box; "one, an American \$5; one, a French 10-franc piece; one, 20 marks, German, of the old Emperor William."

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 loud? I will, if you desire it."

It may seem to those who know Sir Charles that he was not a little startled. He 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 center of the card, which had an embossed edge, with a small middle square of a different color.

Sir Charles had a natural disinclination to signing his name without know-

ingly. "I happened a few weeks ago to travel down 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: report 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.

"Precisely," 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 entrusted with such powers, not to use them in a manner which may annoy or inconvenience my fellow creatures."

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

Senior Herrera seemed intuitively to divine his 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, senior 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! 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 loud? I will, if you desire it."

It may seem to those who know Sir Charles that he was not a little startled. He 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 center of the card, which had an embossed edge, with a small middle square of a different color.

Sir Charles had a natural disinclination to signing his name without know-

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 toward the fireplace, and solemnly burned it. "See—a crumple 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 letter, 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 colors."

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

"I am 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 color?" He held his other arm out. There in sea green letters I read the name, "Charles 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 my right, that is his mother's family. Charles glanced at it hurriedly. "Quite right," he said, "quite right!" But his face was hollow. "I could guess he didn't care to continue the seance. 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. "Any-

days or so I thought no more about her, or the Seer either."

At the end of that time our fortnightly pastbook 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 canceled checks with Sir Charles' counterfoils. On this particular occasion I happened to observe what I can only describe as a very grave discrepancy—in fact, a discrepancy of £2000. On the wrong side, £2000 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 check to self or bearer, for £2000, 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 check in the book which you haven't entered." And I handed it to him without comment, for I thought that it might have been drawn to settle some little loan 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 check. "How do you mean?" I inquired.

"Well," the Seer, he replied, still staring at it ruefully. "I don't mind the five thousand, but to think the fellow should have gammoned the pair of us like that—signatures! 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, recognizing it. "But how the dickens did he manage to transfer it to the check? This