

# THE SCHEMES OF COLONEL CLAY

## THE OLD MASTER

NUMBER III

### BEING EPISODES IN THE LIFE OF A MASTER ROGUE

## BY GRANT ALLEN

LIKE most South Africans, Sir Charles Vandrift is anything but sedentary. He hates sitting down. He must always "trot." 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, Lomburg, 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 Metropole at Brighton. We were the accustomed little family party—Sir Charles and Amelia, myself and Isabel, with the suite as usual.

On the first morning after our arrival we strolled out, Charles and I, 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 maternal headache, which I attributed to the close air of 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 went to meet our wives afterward 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 gazing inquiringly up and down the King's road, on the lookout for a boy with Sunday papers. At last one passed, "Observer," my brother-in-law called out to the boy, "Give me a copy of the paper, please." "But you know the boy answered, brandishing his bundle in our faces. "Ave a Referee or a Pink 'Un?"

Charles, however, was a Referee, 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 blasphemous and 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?" I fancy I bought the last. There's a run on them today, 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 airiness 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 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. As it seemed, indeed, our circles so largely coincided that I wondered he had never happened till then to knock up against me another.

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

I waved my hand toward 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 favorable to his operations in Cioetodory Golconda. He was therefore in a friendly and affable temper. His whole manner changed at once. He grew polite in return to the polite stranger, and he knew Sir Charles was on the point of saying something highly uncomplimentary, and was glad to have escaped it.

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careful?—while 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 Bellaise 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 Rosshire, are almost covered now with leaders and with Or-

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 tooting his horn to let passers-

"Right you are!" I answered. "And I am keeping my eyes 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 great or more varied flow of anecdote. He had been everywhere

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 will try to do will be to vanish into thin air at once, as he did at Nice and Paris; but, this time, well have the police in waiting and everything ready. We'll

ruin our plans, we induced Dr. Polperro (what a cleverly chosen name) to bring the Rembrandt round to the "Metropole" 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. More-

over, 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 £2000. 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 Miss 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 assurance. Next came the question of price. This was warmly debated, for form's sake only. Sir J. H. Tomlinson had paid £2000 for his genuine Rembrandt. The doctor demanded £20,000 for his spurious one. There was really no reason why we should hagle and dispute, for Charles meant merely to give his check for the sum and then to arrest the fellow; but still, we thought it best for the avoidance of suspicion to make a show of resistance, and we at last bet him down to 8000 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 comfortable waiting in our rooms at the Metropole, and we settled that Dr. Polperro was to call at the hotel at a certain fixed hour to sign the 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" (the doctor, having already given us over possession of the portrait, Charles drew a check for the amount agreed upon, and signed it. Then he handed it to the doctor. Polperro just clutched it at him. Meanwhile, I took my post by the door, while two men in plain clothes, detectives from the police station, stood as men servants and watched the window. We feared lest the impostor, once he had got the check, should dodge us somehow, as he had already done at Nice and in Paris. The moment the impostor, 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 Sanchez Antonio Herrera, alias the Rev. Richard Peopoe 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 stupefy his wits. He gazed about him as if he hardly realized what was happening. "Are these two raving maniacs?" he asked, at last, "or what do they mean by this nonsensical gibberish about Antonio Herrera?" The Constable laid his hand on the prisoner's shoulder. "It's all right, my man," he said. "We've got warrants out against you. I arrest you, Edward Polperro, alias the Rev. Richard Peopoe Brabazon, on a charge of obtaining money under false pretences from Sir Charles Vandrift, K. C. M. G., M. P., on his sworn information now here subscribed to." For Charles had had the thing drawn out in readiness beforehand. Our prisoner drew himself up. "Look here, officer," he said in an offended tone, "there's some mistake here in this matter. I have never given an alias at any time in my life. How do you know this is Sir Charles Vandrift? It may be a case of bullying persecution. My belief is, though, they're a pair of escaped lunatics."

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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 7:30, Charles and I strolled out together on the King's road for a blow before dinner. We dined at 8. 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 hothouse grapes, and full of good humor. It was clear he and the lady were occupied in the intense enjoyment of some capital 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 Picaudet?" They were not in the least like the Rev. Richard and Mrs. Brabazon. But that clinched the matter. Nor did I see a sign of the aquiline nose or the Mexican sear. Still, I had learnt by this 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 time 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 solemnity. "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

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 all-had 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 recognize that arch Madame Picaudet 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 to the half-yearly meeting at Cioetodory Golconda, there was our doctor, leaning back in his armchair 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 Marviller'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 jolifying 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. Horse rank first in my mind as beggeters and producers of unscrupulous agents, but pictures ran 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 order not to act precipitately, and so

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