THE SCHEMES OF COLONEL CLAY

Being an Incident in the Life of a Master Rogue

No IV. "The Episode of the Tyrolean Castle" — By Grant Allen

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 rooms. Cesarine 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 England. 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 little 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 savory 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 Western club to be named in the same day with her.

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

"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'—the most comfortable hotel in all South Tyrol; and at this time of year, naturally, it begins already to be cold at Innsbruck.

So to Meran we went; and a prettier of 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, rugged 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 Cesarine's choice; and I was particularly glad she had pronounced for a 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 to do three hours' work a day, I feel that such additions to my normal burden may well be spared me. I tipped Cesarine half a sovereign, in fact, for her judicious choice. Cesarine 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 Cesarine 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 40 of these picturesque, ramshackled old castles from a point on the Kuechelberg. 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 Cesarine'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 halls 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 like 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, and it was built in 1860 with sham antique names, for Macpherson of Seldon, at market prices, by Cubitt & 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—10th or 11th century."

I had been reading it up in Baedeker.) That's the sort of place for me!—10th or 11th century. I could live here, remote from stocks and shares, for ever; and in these sequestered glens, recollect, Sey, my boy, where are no Colonel Clays.

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

As for Amelia, strange to say, she was actually taken with this new fad of Charles' 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 scandalized face of Mayfair and Belgravia. She bores herself to death even at Seldon Castle, Rosshire, 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, where grapes were being picked; pumpkins growing over the walls; Virginia creeper draped over quaint gray schlosses with crimson old oaks, and everything was as beautiful as a dream of Burne-Jones.' (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 Cesarine says, and Cesarine declares there is no climate in Europe like Meran in Winter. I do not agree with her. The sun sets behind the hills at 2 o'clock in the afternoon and a nasty warm wind blows moist over the snow in January and February.

However, Amelia set Cesarine 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 neighborhood. Cesarine 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 the property of high well born grafs and very honorable freiherrs. 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 most 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 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 Rhinelike towers, and its great gnarled 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 Cesarine procured them for us. Armed with these, we drove off one fine afternoon, meaning to go to Planta, by Cesarine'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 Chateau Mounivet. Charles reveled 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 mediaval! 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 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 honorable livery. Nice antique hall; suits of ancestral armor, 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 the Count entered with our cards in his hands. A good looking young man, with the characteristic Tyrolese long black mustache, dressed in a gentlemanly variant on the costume of the country. His air was a jager's; the usual blackcock's plume stuck jauntily in the side of the conical hat (which he held in his hand), after the universal Austrian fashion.

He waved us to seats. We sat down. He spoke to us in French, his English, he remarked, with a pleasant smile, being a negligible quantity. We might speak it, he went on; he could understand pretty well; but he preferred to answer, if we would allow him, in French or German.

"French," Charles replied, and the negotiation continued thenceforth in that language. It is the only one, save English and his ancestral Dutch, with which my brother-in-law possesses even a nodding acquaintance.

We praised the beautiful scene. The Count's face lighted up with patriotic pride. Yes; it was beautiful, his own green Tyrol. He was proud of it and attached to it. But he could endure to sell this place, the home of his fathers, because he had a finer in the Salzkammergut, and a pied-a-terre near Innsbruck. For Tyrol lacked just one joy—the sea. He was a passionate yachtsman. For that he had resolved to sell this estate; after all, three country houses, a ship, and a mansion in Vienna are more than one man can comfortably inhabit.

"Exactly," Charles answered. "If I can come to terms with you about this charming estate I shall sell my own castle in the Scotch highlands." And he tried to look like a proud Scotch chief who harangues his clansmen.

Then they got to business. The Count was a delightful man to do business with. His manners were perfect. While we were talking to him, a surly person, a steward or bailiff, or something of the sort, came into the room unexpectedly and addressed him in German, which none of us understood. We were impressed by the singular urbanity and benignity of the nobleman's demeanor toward this sullen dependent. He evidently explained to the fellow what sort of people we were, and remonstrated with him in a very gentle way for interrupting us. The steward understood, and clearly regretted his insolent air; for after a few sentences he went out, and as he did so he bowed and made protestations of polite regard in his own language. The Count turned to us and smiled. "Our people," he said, "are like your own Scotch peasants—kind-hearted, picturesque, free, musical, poetic, but wanting, alas, in polish to strangers." He was certainly an exception, if he described them aright; for he made us feel at home from the moment we entered.

He named his price in frank terms. His lawyers at Meran held the needful documents and would arrange the negotiations in detail with us. It was a stiff sum, I must say—an extremely stiff sum—but no doubt he was charging us a fancy price for a fancy castle. "He will come down in time," Charles said. "The sum first named in all these transactions is invariably a feeler. They know I'm a millionaire, and people always imagine millionaires are positively made of money."

I may add that people always imagine it must be easier to squeeze money out of millionaires than out of other people—which is the reverse of the truth, or how could they ever have amassed their millions? Instead of oozing gold as a tree oozes gum, they mop it up like blotting paper, and seldom give it out again.

We drove back from this first interview none the less very well satisfied. The price was too high; but preliminaries were arranged, and for the rest, the Count desired us to discuss all details with his lawyers in the chief street, Unter den Lauben. We inquired about these lawyers and found they were most respectable and respected men; they had done the family business on either side for seven generations.

They showed us plans and title deeds. Everything quite en regle. Till we came to the price there was no hitch of any sort.

As to the price, however, the lawyers were obdurate. They stuck out for the Count's first sum to the uttermost florin. It was a very big estimate. We talked and shilly-shallied till Sir Charles grew angry. He lost his temper at last.

"They know I'm a millionaire. Sey," he said, "and they're playing the old game of trying to diddle me. But I won't be diddled. Except Colonel Clay, no man has ever yet succeeded in bleeding me. And shall I let myself be bled as if I were a chamois among these innocent mountains? Perish the thought!" Then he reflected a little in silence. "Sey," he mused on, at last, "the question is, are they innocent? Do you know, I begin to believe there is no such thing left as pristine innocence anywhere. This Tyrolese Count knows the value of a pound as distinctly as if he hung out in Chapel Court or Kimberley."

Things dragged on in this way, inconclusively, for a week or two. We bid down; the lawyers stuck to it. Sir Charles grew half sick of the whole silly business. For my own part, I felt sure if the high, well-born Count didn't quicken his pace my respected relative would shortly have had enough of the Tyrol altogether, and be proof against the most lovely crag-crowning castles. But the Count didn't see it. He came to call on us at our hotel—a rare honor for a stranger with these haughty and exclusive Tyrolese nobles—and even entered unnanounced in the most friendly manner. But when it came to pounds, shillings and pence, he was absolute adamant. Not one kreutzer would he abate from his original proposal.

"You misunderstand," he said, with pride; "we Tyrolese gentlemen are not shopkeepers or merchants. We do not higgle. If we say a thing, we stick to it. Were you an Austrian, I should feel insulted by your ill-advised attempt to beat down my price. But as you belong to a great commercial Nation—"

He broke off with a snort and shrugged his shoulders compassionately.

We saw him several times driving in and out of the schloss, and every time he waved his hand at us gracefully. But when we tried to bargain, it was always the same thing; he retired behind the shelter of his Tyrolese nobility. We might take it or leave it. 'Twas still Schloss Lebenstein.

The lawyers were as bad. We tried all we knew, and got no "forrader."

At last Charles gave up the attempt in disgust. He was tiring, as I expected. "It's the prettiest place I ever saw in my life," he said; "but, hang it all, Sey, I won't be imposed upon."

So he made up his mind, it being now December, to return to London. We met the Count next day, and stopped his carriage and told him so. Charles thought this would have the immediate effect of bringing the man to reason. But he only lifted his hat, with the black cock's feather, and smiled a bland smile. "The Archduke Karl is inquiring about it," he answered, and drove on without parley.

Charles used some strong words, which I will not transcribe (I am a family man), and returned to England.

For the next two months we heard little from Amelia save her regret that the Count wouldn't sell us Schloss Lebenstein. Its pinnacles had fairly pierced her heart. Strange to say, she was absolutely infatuated about the castle. She rather wanted the place while she was there, and thought she could get it; now she thought she couldn't, her soul (if she has one) was wildly set upon it. Moreover, Cesarine further inflamed her desire by gently hinting a fact which she picked up at the courier's table d'hote at the hotel—that the Count had been far from anxious to sell his ancestral and historical estate to a South African diamond king. He thought the honor of the family demanded, at least, that he should secure a wealthy buyer of good ancient lineage.

One morning in February, however, Amelia returned from the Row all smiles and tremors. (She had been ordered horse exercise to correct the increasing excessiveness of her figure.)

"Who do you think I saw riding in the park?" she inquired. "Why, the Count of Lebenstein."

"No!" Charles exclaimed, incredulous.

"Yes," Amelia answered.

"Must be mistaken," Charles cried.

But Amelia stuck to it. More than that, she sent out emissaries to inquire diligently from the London lawyers, whose name had been mentioned to us by the ancestral firm in Unter den Lauben as their English agents, as to the whereabouts of our friend; and her emissaries learned in effect that the Count was in town, and stopping at Morley's.

"I see through it," Charles exclaimed. "He finds he's made a mistake and now he's come over here to reopen negotiations."

I was all for waiting prudently till the Count made the first move. "Don't let him see your eagerness," I said; but Amelia's ardor could not now be restrained. She insisted that Charles should call on the Graf as a mere return of his politeness in the Tyrol.

He was as charming as ever. He talked to us with delight about the quaintness of London. He would be ravished to dine next evening with Sir Charles. He desired his respectful salutions meanwhile to Miladi Vandrift and Mme. "Ventvorth."

He dined with us, almost en famille. Amelie's cook did wonders. In the billiard-room, about midnight, Charles reopened the subject. The Count was really touched. It pleased him that still, amid the distractions of the city of five million souls, we should remember with affection his beloved Lebenstein.

"Come to my lawyers," he said, "tomorrow, and I will talk it over with you."

We went—a most respectable firm in Southampton row; old family solicitors. They had done business for years for the late Count, who had inherited from his grandmother estates in Ireland, and they were glad to be honored with the confidence of his successor. Glad, too, to make the acquaintance of a prince of finance like Sir Charles Vandrift. Eager (rubbing their hands) to arrange matters satisfactorily all round for everybody. (Two capital families with which to be mixed up, you see.)

Sir Charles named a price, and referred them to his solicitors. The Count named a higher, but still a little come-down, and left the matter to be settled between the lawyers. He was a soldier and a gentleman, he said, with a Tyrolese toss of his high-born head; he would abandon details to men of business.

As I was really desirous to oblige Amelia, I met the Count accidentally next day on the steps Morley's. (Accidentally, that is to say, so far as he was concerned, though I had been hanging about in Trafalgar Square for half an hour to see him.) I explained in guarded terms that I had a great deal of influence in my way with Sir Charles, and that a word from me——. I broke off. He stared at me blankly.

"Commission?" he inquired, at last, with a queer little smile.

"Well, not exactly commission," I answered, wincing. "Still, a friendly word, you know. One good turn deserves another."

He looked at me from head to foot with a curious scrutiny. For one moment I feared the Tyrolese nobleman in him was going to raise its foot and take active measures. For the next, I saw that Sir Charles was right, after all, and that pristine innocence has removed from this planet to other quarters.

He named his lowest price.

"M. Ventvorth," he said, impressively, "I am a Tyrolese seigneur; I do not dabble, myself, in commissions and percentages. But if your influence with Sir Charles—we understand each other, do we not?—as between gentlemen—a little friendly present—no money, of course—but the equivalent of say 5 per cent in jewelry, or whatever sum above his bid today you induce him to offer—eh?—c'est convenu?"

"Ten per cent is more usual," I murmured.

He was the Austrian hussar again. "Five, monsieur—or nothing."

I bowed and withdrew. "Well, five, then," I answered, "just to oblige your Serenity."

A secretary, after all, can do a great deal. When it came to the scratch, I had but little difficulty in persuading Sir Charles, with Amelia's aid, backed up on either side by Isabel and Cesarine, to accede to the Count's most reasonable proposal. The Southampton row people had possession of certain facts as to the value of the wines in the Bordeaux market, which clinched the matter. In a week or two all was settled: Charles and I met the Count by appointment in Southampton row, and saw him sign, seal and deliver the title deeds of Schloss Lebenstein. My brother-in-law paid the purchase money into the Count's own hands, by check, crossed on a first-class London firm, where the Count kept an account in his high, well-born order. Then he went away with the proud knowledge that he was owner of Schloss Lebenstein. And what to me was more important still, I received next morning by post a check for the 5 per cent, unfortunately drawn, by some misapprehension, to my order on the selfsame bankers, and with the Count's signature. He explained in the accompanying note that, the matter being now quite satisfactorily concluded, he saw no reason of delicacy why the amount he had promised should not be paid to me forthwith direct in money.

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

Though it was now late in March, and the House was sitting, Sir Charles insisted that we must all run over at once to take possession of our magnificent Tyrolese castle. Amelia was almost equally burning with eagerness. She gave herself the airs of a Countess already. We took the Orient express as far as Munich; then the Brenner to Meran, and put up for the night at the "Erzherzog Johann." Though we had telegraphed our arrival, and expected some fuss, there was no demonstration. Next morning we drove out in state to the schloss, to enter into enjoyment of our vines and fig trees.

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

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

And the Count with the mustache? It dawned upon us now. Colonel Clay again! more audacious than ever!

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

There was nothing for it but to return as best we might to the "Erzherzog Johann," crestfallen, and telegraph particulars to the police in London.

Charles and I ran across posthaste to England to track down the Italian. At Southampton Row we found the legal firm by no means penitent; on the contrary, they were indignant at the way we had deceived them. An imposter had written to them on Lebenstein paper from Meran to say that he was coming to London to negotiate the sale of the schloss and surrounding property with the famous millionaire, Sir Charles Vandrift, and Sir Charles had demonstratively recognized him at sight as the real Count von Lebenstein. The firm had never seen the present Graf at all, and had swallowed the imposter whole, so to speak, on the strength of Sir Charles' obvious recognition. He had brought over as documents some excellent forgeries—facsimilies of the originals—which, as our courier and interpreter, he had every opportunity of examining and inspecting at the Meran lawyers'. It was a deeply laid plot, and it had succeeded to a marvel. Yet, all of it depended upon the one small fact that we had accepted the man with the long mustache in the hall of the schloss as the Count von Lebenstein on his own representation.

He held our cards in his hands when he came in; and the servant had not given them to him, but to the genuine Count. That was the one unsolved mystery in the whole adventure.

By the evening's post two letters arrived for us at Sir Charles' house—one for myself and one for my employer. Sir Charles' ran thus:

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

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

"I kiss your hand. No longer,

"VON LEBENSTEIN."

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

"Dear Good Mr. Ventvorth—Ha, ha, ha! Just a W misplaced sufficed to take you in, then! And I risked the TH, though anybody with a head on his shoulders would surely have known our TH is by far more difficult than our W for foreigners! However, all's well that ends well; and now I've got you. The Lord has delivered you into my hands, dear friend—on your own initiative. I hold my check, indorsed by you, and cashed at my banker's, as a hostage, so to speak, for your future good behavior. If ever you recognize me, and betray me to that solemn old ass, your employer, remember, I expose it, and you with it to him. So now we understand each other. I had not thought of this little dodge; it was you who suggested it. However, I jumped at it. Was it not well worth my while paying you that slight commission in return for a guarantee of your future silence? Your mouth is now closed. And cheap, too, at the price.

"Yours, dear comrade in the great confraternity of rogues,

"CUTHBERT CLAY, Colonel."

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

"From a lady," I answered.

He gazed at me suspiciously. "Oh, I thought it was the same hand," he said. His eye looked through me.

"No," I answered. "Mrs. Mortimer's." But I confess I trembled.

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

"Oh, yes," I put in quickly. (I had taken good care about that, you may be sure, lest he should spot the commission.) "They say the self-styled Count von Lebenstein was introduced to them by the Southampton row folks and drew, as usual, on the Lebenstein account. So they were quite unsuspicious. A rascal who goes about the world on that scale, you know, and arrives with such credentials as theirs and yours, naturally imposes on anybody. The bank didn't even require to have him formally identified. The firm was enough. He came to pay money in, not to draw it out; and he withdrew his balance just two days later, saying he was in a hurry to get back to Vienna."

Would he ask for items? I confess I felt it was an awkward moment. Charles, however, was too full of regrets to bother about the account. He leaned back in his easy chair, stuck his hands in his pockets, held his legs straight out on the fender before him and looked the very picture of hopeless despondency.

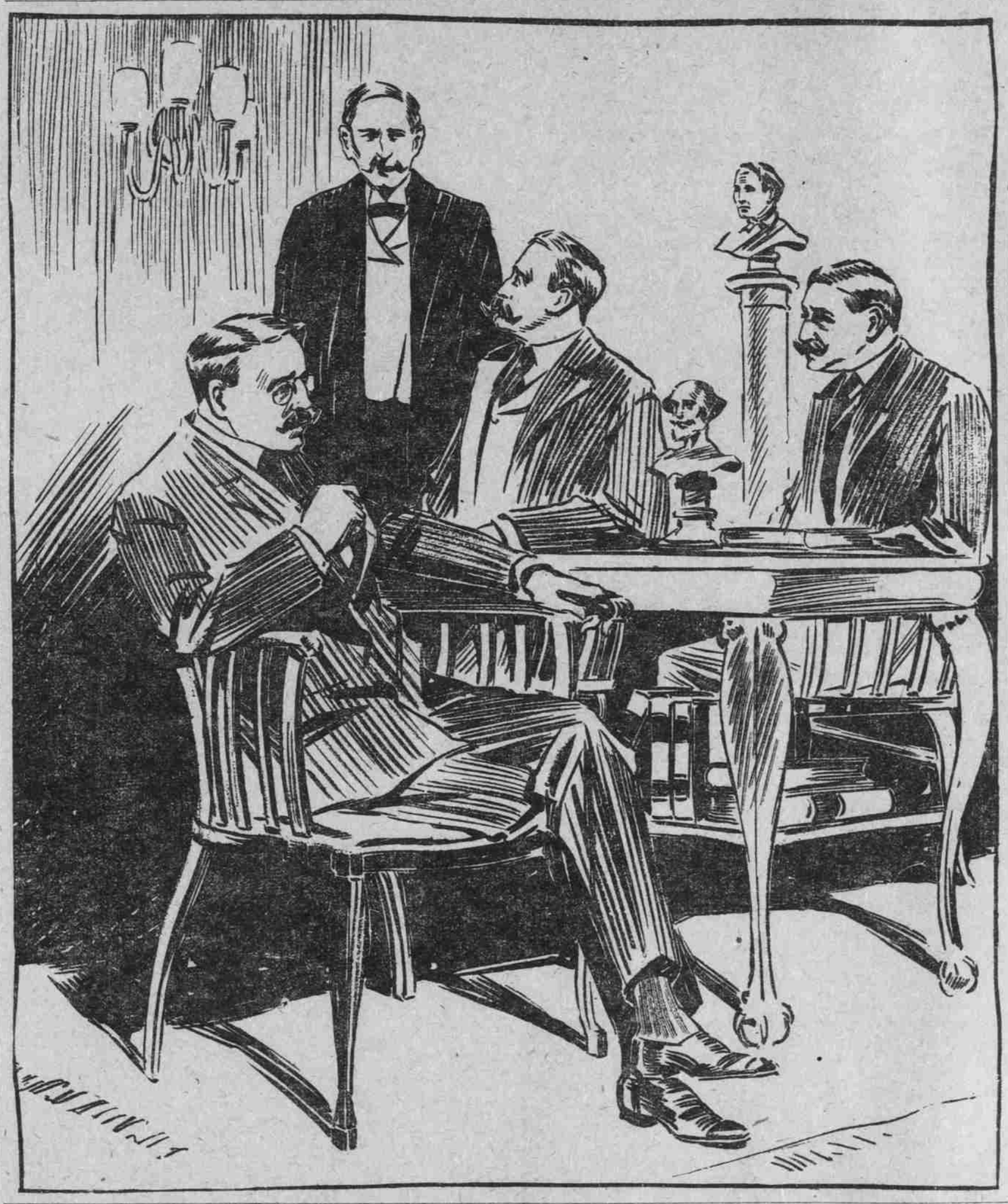
"Sey," he began, after a minute or two, poking the fire, reflectively, "what a genius that man has! 'Pon my soul, I admire him! I sometimes wish——" He broke off and hesitated.

"Yes, Charles?" I answered.

"I sometimes wish—we had got him on the board of the Cloetedorp Golcondas. Magnificent combinations he would make in the city!"

I rose from my seat and stared solemnly at my misguided brother-in-law.

"Charles," I said, "you are beside yourself. Too much Colonel Clay has told upon your clear and splendid intellect. There are certain remarks which, however true they may be, no self-respecting financier should permit himself to make, even in the privacy of his own room, to his most intimate friend and adviser."

"You are right, Sey," he sobbed out. "Quite right. Forgive this outburst. At moments of emotion the truth will sometimes out, in spite of everything."

I respected his feebleness. I did not even make it a fitting occasion to ask for a trifling increase of salary.