THE EPISODE OF THE GERMAN PROFESSOR

Grant Allen

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THAT winter in town my respected brother−in−law had little time on his hands to bother himself about trifles like Colonel Clay. A thunderclap burst upon him. He saw his chief interest in South Africa threatened by a serious, an unexpected, and a crushing danger.

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

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Full many a gem of purest ray serene
The dark, unfathomed caves of ocean bear.
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He rubbed his hands at once and murmured enthusiastically, 'I never thought of that. We might get up an Atlantic Exploration Syndicate, Limited.' So attached is he to diamonds. You may gather, therefore, what a shock it was to that gigantic brain to learn that science was rapidly reaching a point where his favourite gems might become all at once a mere drug in the market. Depreciation is the one bugbear that perpetually torments Sir Charles's soul; that winter he stood within measurable distance of so appalling a calamity.

It happened after this manner.

We were strolling along Piccadilly towards Charles's club one afternoon he is a prominent member of the Croesus, in Pall Mall when, near Burlington House, whom should we happen to knock up against but Sir Adolphus Cordery, the famous mineralogist, and leading spirit of the Royal Society! He nodded to us pleasantly. 'Halloa, Vandrift,' he cried, in his peculiarly loud and piercing voice; 'you're the very man I wanted to meet to−day. Good morning, Wentworth. Well, how about diamonds now, Sir Gorgius? You'll have to sing small It's all up with you Midases. Heard about this marvellous new discovery of Schleiermacher's? It's calculated to make you diamond kings squirm like an eel in a frying−pan.'

I could see Charles wriggle inside his clothes. He was most uncomfortable. That a man like Cordery should say such things, in so loud a voice, on no matter how little foundation, openly in Piccadilly, was enough in itself to make a sensitive barometer such as Cloetedorp Golcondas go down a point or two.

'Hush, hush !' Charles said solemnly, in that awed tone of voice which he always assumes when Money is blasphemed against. 'Please don't talk quite so loud! All London can hear you.'

Sir Adolphus ran his arm through Charles's most amicably. There's nothing Charles hates like having his arm taken.

'Come along with me to the Athenaeum,' he went on, in the same stentorian voice, 'and I'll tell you all about it. Most interesting discovery. Makes diamonds cheap as dirt. Calculated to supersede South Africa altogether.'

Charles allowed himself to be dragged along. There was nothing else possible. Sir Adolphus continued, in a somewhat lower key, induced upon him by Charles's mute look of protest. It was a disquieting story. He told it with gleeful unction. It seems that Professor Schleiermacher, of Jena, 'the greatest living authority on the chemistry of gems,' he said, had lately invented, or claimed to have invented, a system for artificially producing diamonds, which had yielded most surprising and unexceptionable results.

Charles's lip curled slightly. 'Oh, I know the sort of thing,' he said. 'I've heard of it before. Very inferior stones, quite small and worthless, produced at immense cost, and even then not worth looking at. I'm an old bird, you know, Cordery; not to be caught with chaff. Tell me a better one!'

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

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

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

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

Charles drew a long breath. 'This nonsense must be stopped,' he said firmly 'it must be nipped in the bud. It won't do, my dear friend; we can't have such tampering with important Interests.'

'How do you mean?' Cordery asked, astonished.

Charles gazed at him steadily. I could see by the furtive gleam in my brother−in−law's eye he was distinctly frightened. 'Where is the fellow?' he asked. 'Did he come himself, or send over a deputy?'

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

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

He said 'Shares' in a tone of profound respect that I can hardly even indicate. It was the crucial word in the creed of his religion.

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

Sir Charles was bland, but peremptory. 'Now, observe,' he said, 'a grave responsibility rests on your shoulders. The Market depends upon you. You must not ask in any number of outsiders to witness these experiments. Have a few mineralogists and experts, if you like; but also take care to invite representatives of the menaced Interests. I will come myself I'm engaged to dine out, but I can contract an indisposition; and I should advise you to ask Mosenheimer, and, say, young Phipson. They would stand for the mines, as you and the mineralogists would stand for science. Above all, don't blab; for Heaven's sake, let there be no premature gossip. Tell Schleiermacher not to go gassing and boasting of his success all over London.'

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

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

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

He was a remarkable−looking man, once tall, I should say, from his long, thin build, but now bowed and bent with long devotion to study and leaning over a crucible. His hair, prematurely white, hung down upon his forehead, but his eye was keen and his mouth sagacious. He shook hands cordially with the men of science, whom he seemed to know of old, whilst he bowed somewhat distantly to the South African interest. Then he began to talk, in very German−English, helping out the sense now and again, where his vocabulary failed him, by waving his rather dirty and chemical−stained hands demonstratively about him. His nails were a sight, but his fingers, I must say, had the delicate shape of a man's accustomed to minute manipulation. He plunged at once into the thick of the matter, telling us briefly in his equally thick accent that he 'now brobosed by his new brocess to make for us some goot and sadisfactory tiamonds.'

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

The materials fizzed and fumed. The Professor stirred them. An unpleasant smell like burnt feathers pervaded the room. The scientific men craned their necks in their eagerness, and looked over one another; Vane−Vivian, in particular, was all attention. After three−quarters of an hour, the Professor, still smiling, began to empty the apparatus. He removed a large quantity of dust or powder, which he succinctly described as 'by−broducts,' and then took between finger and thumb from the midst of each pan a small white pebble, not water−worn apparently, but slightly rough and wart−like on the surface.

From one pair of the pannikins he produced two such stones, and held them up before us triumphantly. 'Zese,' he said, ' are genuine tiamonds, manufactured at a gost of fourteen shillings and siggspence abiece!' Then he tried the second pair. 'Zese,' he said, still more gleefully, 'are broduced at a gost of eleffen and ninebence!' Finally, he came to the third pair, which he positively brandished before our astonished eyes. 'And zese,' he cried, transported, 'haff gost me no more zan tree and eightbence!'

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

'I vill now disdribute zem,' the Professor remarked in a casual tone, as if diamonds were peas, looking round at the company. And he singled out my brother−in−law. 'One to Sir Charles!' he said, handing it; 'one to Mr. Mosenheimer; one to Mr. Phibson as representing the tiamond interest. Zen, one each to Sir Atolphus, to Dr. Gray, to Mr. Fane−Fiffian, as representing science. You will haff zem cut and rebort upon zem in due gourse. We meet again at zis blace ze day afder do−morrow.'

Charles gazed at him reproachfully. The profoundest chords of his moral nature were stirred. 'Professor,' he said, in a voice of solemn warning, 'are you aware that, if you have succeeded, you have destroyed the value of thousands of pounds' worth of precious property?'

The Professor shrugged his shoulders. 'Fot is dat to me?' he inquired, with a curious glance of contempt. 'I am not a financier! I am a man of science. I seek to know; I do not seek to make a fortune.'

'Shocking!' Charles exclaimed. 'Shocking! never before in my life beheld so strange an instance of complete insensibility to the claims of others!'

We separated early. The men of science were coarsely jubilant. The diamond interest exhibited a corresponding depression. If this news were true, they foresaw a slump. Every eye grew dim. It was a terrible business.

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

'No, no!' he replied, with positive petulance. 'You do not unterstant. I do not buy and sell. Zis is a chemical fact. We must bublish it for the sake off its seoretical falue. I do not care for wealse. I haff no time to waste in making money.'

'What an awful picture of a misspent life!' Charles observed to me afterwards.

And, indeed, the man seemed to care for nothing on earth but the abstract question not whether he could make good diamonds or −not, but whether he could or could not produce a crystalline form of pure carbon!

On the appointed night Charles went back to Lancaster Gate, as I could not fail to remark, with a strange air of complete and painful preoccupation. Never before in his life had I seen him so anxious.

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

I confess it was a sufficiently suspicious conjunction. The three representatives of the diamond interest gazed at each other with inquiring side−glances. Then their eyes fell suddenly: they avoided one another. Had each independently substituted a weak and inferior natural stone for Professor Schleiermacher's manufactured pebbles? It almost seemed so. For a moment, I admit, I was half inclined to suppose it. But next second I changed my mind. Could a man of Sir Charles Vandrift's integrity and high principle stoop for lucre's sake to so mean an expedient? not to mention the fact that, even if he did, and if Mosenheimer did likewise, the stones submitted to the scientific men would have amply sufficed to establish the reality and success of the experiments!

Still, I must say, Charles looked guiltily across at Mosenheimer, and Mosenheimer at Phipson, while three more uncomfortable or unhappy−faced men could hardly have been found at that precise minute in the City of Westminster.

Then Sir Adolphus spoke or, rather, he orated. He said, in his loud and grating voice, we had that evening, and on a previous evening, been present at the conception and birth of an Epoch in the History of Science. Professor Schleiermacher was one of those men of whom his native Saxony might well be proud; while as a Briton he must say he regretted somewhat that this discovery, like so many others, should have been 'Made in Germany.'

However, Professor Schleiermacher was a specimen of that noble type of scientific men to whom gold was merely the rare metal Au, and diamonds merely the element C in the scarcest of its manifold allotropic embodiments. The Professor did not seek to make money out of his discovery. He rose above the sordid greed of capitalists. Content with the glory of having traced the element C to its crystalline origin, he asked no more than the approval of science. However, out of deference to the wishes of those financial gentlemen who were oddly concerned in maintaining the present price of C in its crystalline form in other words, the diamond interest they had arranged that the secret should be strictly guarded and kept for the present; not one of the few persons admitted to the experiments would publicly divulge the truth about them. This secrecy would be maintained till he himself, and a small committee of the Royal Society, should have time to investigate and verify for themselves the Professor's beautiful and ingenious processes an investigation and verification which the learned Professor himself both desired and suggested. (Schleiermacher nodded approval.) When that was done, if the process stood the test, further concealment would be absolutely futile. The price of diamonds must fall at once below that of paste, and any protest on the part of the financial world would, of course, be useless. The laws of Nature were superior to millionaires. Meanwhile, in deference to the opinion of Sir Charles Vandrift, whose acquaintance with that fascinating side of the subject nobody could deny, they had consented to send no notices to the Press, and to abstain from saying anything about this beautiful and simple process in public. He dwelt with horrid gusto on that epithet 'beautiful.' And now, in the name of British mineralogy, he must congratulate Professor Schleiermacher, our distinguished guest, on his truly brilliant and crystalline contribution to our knowledge of brilliants and of crystalline science.

Everybody applauded. It was an awkward moment. Sir Charles bit his lip. Mosenheimer looked glum. Young Phipson dropped an expression which I will not transcribe. (I understand this work may circulate among families.) And after a solemn promise of death−like secrecy, the meeting separated.

I noticed that my brother−in−law somewhat ostentatiously avoided Mosenheimer at the door; and that Phipson jumped quickly into his own carriage. 'Home!' Charles cried gloomily to the coachman as we took our seats in the brougham. And all the way to Mayfair he leaned back in his seat, with close−set lips, never uttering a syllable.

Before he retired to rest, however, in the privacy of the billiard−room, I ventured to ask him: 'Charles, will you unload Golcondas to−morrow?' Which, I need hardly explain, is the slang of the Stock Exchange for getting rid of undesirable securities. It struck me as probable that, in the event of the invention turning out a reality, Cloetedorp A's might become unsaleable within the next few weeks or so.

He eyed me sternly. 'Wentworth,' he said, 'you're a fool!' (Except on occasions when he is very angry, my respected connection never calls me 'Wentworth'; the familiar abbreviation, 'Sey' derived from Seymour is his usual mode of address to me in private.) 'Is it likely I would unload, and wreck the confidence of the public in the Cloetedorp Company at such a moment? As a director as Chairman would it be just or right of me? I ask you, sir, could I reconcile it to my conscience?'

'Charles,' I answered, 'you are right. Your conduct is noble. You will not save your own personal interests at the expense of those who have put their trust in you. Such probity is, alas! very rare in finance!' And I sighed involuntarily; for I had lost in Liberators.

At the same time I thought to myself, 'I am not a director. No trust is reposed in me. I have to think first of dear Isabel and the baby. Before the crash comes I will sell out to−morrow the few shares I hold, through Charles's kindness, in the Cloetedorp Golcondas.'

With his marvellous business instinct, Charles seemed to divine my thought, for he turned round to me sharply. 'Look here, Sey,' he remarked, in an acidulous tone, 'recollect, you're my brother−in−law. You are also my secretary. The eyes of London will be upon us to−morrow. If you were to sell out, and operators got to know of it, they'd suspect there was something up, and the company would suffer for it. Of course, you can do what you like

with your own property. I can't interfere with that. I do not dictate to you. But as Chairman of the Golcondas, I am bound to see that the interests of widows and orphans whose All is invested with me should not suffer at this crisis.' His voice seemed to falter. 'Therefore, though I don't like to threaten,' he went on, 'I am bound to give you warning: if you sell out those shares of yours, openly or secretly, you are no longer my secretary; you receive forthwith six months' salary in lieu of notice, and you leave me instantly.'

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

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

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

'I think I ought to mention to you,' he said, confidentially, 'that I have it on the very best authority that Schleiermacher, of Jena '

'Thank you,' Charles said, crustily, 'I know that tale, and there's not a word of truth in it.'

He brushed on in haste. A yard or two farther a broker paused in front of us.

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

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

'Why, you were there yourself,' the man cried. 'Last night at Sir Adolphus's! Oh yes, it's all over the place; Schleiermacher of Jena has succeeded in making the most perfect diamonds for sixpence apiece as good as real and South Africa's ancient history. In less than six weeks Kimberley, they say, will be a howling desert. Every costermonger in Whitechapel will wear genuine Koh−i−noors for buttons on his coat; every girl in Bermondsey will sport a riviere like Lady Vandrift's to her favourite music−hall. There's a slump in Golcondas. Sly, sly, I can see; but we know all about it!'

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

'Ah, Sir Charles,' he said; 'you here? Well, this is strange news, isn't it? For my part, I advise you not to take it too seriously. Your stock will go down, of course, like lead this morning. But it'll rise to−morrow, mark my words, and fluctuate every hour till the discovery's proved or disproved for certain. There's a fine time coming for operators, I feel sure. Reports this way and that. Rumours, rumours, rumours. And nobody will know which way to believe till Sir Adolphus has tested it.'

We moved on towards the House. Black care was seated on Sir Charles's shoulders. As we drew nearer and nearer, everybody was discussing the one fact of the moment. The seal of secrecy had proved more potent than publication on the housetops.

Some people told us of the exciting news in confidential whispers; some proclaimed it aloud in vulgar exultation. The general opinion was that Cloetedorps were doomed, and that the sooner a man cleared out the less was he likely to lose by it.

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

All day long the City rang with Golcondas, Golcondas. Everybody murmured, 'Slump, slump in Golcondas.' The brokers had more business to do than they could manage; though, to be sure, almost every one was a seller and no one a buyer. But Charles stood firm as a rock, and so did his brokers. 'I don't want to sell,' he said, doggedly. 'The whole thing is trumped up. It's a mere piece of jugglery. For my own part, I believe Professor Schleiermacher is deceived, or else is deceiving us. In another week the bubble will have burst, and prices will restore themselves.' His brokers, Finglemores, had only one answer to all inquiries: 'Sir Charles has every confidence in the stability of Golcondas, and doesn't wish to sell or to increase the panic.'

All the world said he was splendid, splendid! There he stationed himself on 'Change like some granite stack against which the waves roll and break themselves in vain. He took no notice of the slump, but ostentatiously bought up a few shares here and there so as to restore public confidence.

'I would buy more,' he said, freely, 'and make my fortune; only, as I was one of those who happened to spend last night at Sir Adolphus's, people might think I had helped to spread the rumour and produce the slump, in order to buy in at panic rates for my own advantage. A chairman, like Caesar's wife, should be above suspicion. So I shall only buy up just enough, now and again, to let people see I, at least, have no doubt as to the firm future of Cloetedorps.'

He went home that night, more harassed and ill than I have ever seen him. Next day was as bad. The slump continued, with varying episodes. Now, a rumour would surge up that Sir Adolphus had declared the whole affair a sham, and prices would steady a little; now, another would break out that the diamonds were actually being put upon the market in Berlin by the cart−load, and timid old ladies would wire down to their brokers to realise off−hand at whatever hazard. It was an awful day. I shall never forget it.

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

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

'Sorry unintentionally to have caused you trouble.' Charles was beside himself with anger. Sir Adolphus had upset the share−market for forty−eight mortal hours, half−ruined a round dozen of wealthy operators, convulsed the City, upheaved the House, and now he apologised for it as one might apologise for being late ten minutes for dinner! Charles jumped into a hansom and rushed round to see him. How had he dared to introduce the impostor to solid men as Professor Schleiermacher? Sir Adolphus shrugged his shoulders. The fellow had come and introduced himself as the great Jena chemist; he had long white hair, and a stoop in the shoulders. What reason had he for doubting his word? (I reflected to myself that on much the same grounds Charles in turn had accepted the Honourable David Granton and Graf von Lebenstein.) Besides, what object could the creature have for this extraordinary deception? Charles knew only too well. It was clear it was done to disturb the diamond market, and we realised, too late, that the man who had done it was Colonel Clay, in 'another of his manifold allotropic embodiments!' Charles had had his wish, and had met his enemy once more in London!

We could see the whole plot. Colonel Clay was polymorphic, like the element carbon! Doubtless, with his extraordinary sleight of hand, he had substituted real diamonds for the shapeless mass that came out of the apparatus, in the interval between handing the pebbles round for inspection, and distributing them piecemeal to the men of science and representatives of the diamond interest. We all watched him closely, of course, when he opened the crucibles; but when once we had satisfied ourselves that something came out, our doubts were set at rest, and we forgot to watch whether he distributed those somethings or not to the recipients. Conjurers always depend upon such momentary distractions or lapses of attention. As usual, too, the Professor had disappeared into space the moment his trick was once well performed. He vanished like smoke, as the Count and Seer had vanished before, and was never again heard of.

Charles went home more angry than I have ever beheld him. I couldn't imagine why. He seemed as deeply hipped as if he had lost his thousands. I endeavoured to console him. 'After all,' I said, 'though Golcondas have suffered a temporary loss, it's a comfort to think that you should have stood so firm, and not only stemmed the tide, but also prevented yourself from losing anything at all of your own through panic. I'm sorry, of course, for the widows and orphans; but if Colonel Clay has rigged the market, at least it isn't you who lose by it this time.'

Charles withered me with a fierce scowl of undisguised contempt. 'Wentworth,' he said once more, 'you are a fool!' Then he relapsed into silence.

'But you declined to sell out,' I said.

He gazed at me fixedly. 'Is it likely,' he asked at last, 'I would tell you if I meant to sell out? or that I'd sell out openly through Finglemore, my usual broker? Why, all the world would have known, and Golcondas would have been finished. As it is, I don't desire to tell an ass like you exactly how much I've lost. But I did sell out, and some unknown operator bought in at once, and closed for ready money, and has sold again this morning; and after all that has happened, it will be impossible to track him. He didn't wait for the account: he settled up instantly. And he sold in like manner. I know now what has been done, and how cleverly it has all been disguised and covered; but the most I'm going to tell you to−day is just this it's by far the biggest haul Colonel Clay has made out of me. He could retire on it if he liked. My one hope is, it may satisfy him for life; but, then, no man has ever had enough of making money.'

'You sold out!' I exclaimed. 'You, the Chairman of the company! You deserted the ship! And how about your trust? How about the widows and orphans confided to you?'

Charles rose and faced me. 'Seymour Wentworth,' he said, in his most solemn voice, 'you have lived with me for years and had every advantage. You have seen high finance. Yet you ask me that question! It's my belief you will never, never understand business!'