

Hume Fergus

The Harlequin Opal: A Romance.
Volume 1 of 3



Fergus Hume

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Romance. Volume 1 of 3**

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PROEM

The stone had its birth in the nurturing earth.
Its home in the heart of the main,
From the coralline caves it was tossed by the waves
On the breast of an aureate plain;
And the spirits who dwell in the nethermost hell
Stored fire in its bosom of white;
The sylphs of the air made it gracious and fair
With the blue of the firmament's height.

The dull gnomes I ween, gave it glittering sheen.
Till yellow as gold it became:
The nymphs of the sea made the opal to be
A beacon of emerald flame.

The many tints glow, they come and they go
At bidding of spirits abhorr'd,
When one ray is bright, in the bosom of white,
Its hue tells the fate of its lord.
For yellow hints wealth, and blue meaneth health,
While green forbodes passing of gloom,
But beware of the red, 'tis an omen of dread,
Portending disaster and doom.

CHAPTER I

CHUMS

Long years have passed since last we met,
And left their marks of teen and fret;
No longer faces plump and smooth,
Proclaim the halcyon days of youth.
But haggard looks and tresses white
Betray the ardour of the fight;
The same old friends: we meet once more —
But not the merry boys of yore.

"It is a great mistake," said Sir Philip Cassim, looking doubtfully at the piece of paper lying on his desk; "then we were foolish boys, now we are — I trust sensible men. Certainly it is a great mistake."

The piece of paper was yellow with age, a trifle grimy, and so worn with constant foldings, that it was wonderful the four quarters had not long since parted company, as had the four friends, each of whom carried a similar piece in his pocket-book. Often in his wanderings had Sir Philip pondered over that untidy boyish scribble setting forth the foolish promise, which he now, half regretfully, characterised as "a great mistake."

*"Bedford Grammar School,
"24th July, 1874.*

"If we live and are in good health, we promise faithfully to meet at Philip's house, in Portman Square, London, on the twenty-fourth day of July, one thousand eight hundred and eighty-nine, at seven o'clock in the evening.

"(Signed)

*"Philip Winthorp Cassim,
John Duval,
Peter Paul Grench,
Timothy Terence Patrick Fletcher."*

"That is quite fifteen years ago," said Cassim, smoothing the frail paper with tender fingers; "now it is the twenty-fourth day of July in the year eighty-nine. Six o'clock! I wonder if any of them will turn up. Jack is an engineer, building railways and bridges in China. Peter, as a respectable physician, doses invalids in Devonshire. Special Correspondent Tim, the stormy petrel of war, wires lies to London newspapers. I — I am a mere idler, given to wanderings among the tombs of dead civilisations. Peter may come. It means only a short railway journey to him; but Jack and Tim are probably thousands of miles away. Still, as I came from the Guinea Coast to meet them, they certainly ought not to miss the appointment. This is the day, the place, the hour, and I have prepared the fatted calf, of which they will partake — if they turn up. Pshaw! I am a fool to think they will come. They have, no doubt, quite forgotten this boyish freak. Perhaps it is best so. It is a great mistake to arrange a meeting fifteen years ahead. Father Time is too fond of strange surprises."

Rising from his chair, he paced slowly to and fro with folded arms, and bent head, the droop of this latter being somewhat dejected. The idea that he was about to meet his old schoolfellows rendered

him pensive, and a trifle regretful. Many years had passed since those halcyon days of youth, and, oh, the difference between now and then! He could hardly avoid speculating on their certain mutation. Had the wand of Time changed those merry lads into staid men? Would Jack still be ambitious as of yore? Tim's jokes were famous in the old days; but now, perchance, he found life too serious for jesting. Then Peter's butterflies! How often they had laughed at his entomological craze. Now, doubtless, he was more taken up with pills and patients. And himself, – he had out-lived his youthful enthusiasms, more's the pity. No wonder he felt pensive at the thought of such changes. Retrospection is a saddening faculty.

Cassim grew weary of these pessimistic fancies, and pausing in front of the fireplace, surveyed himself long and critically in the mirror. It reflected a dark, handsome face, reddened by the saltiness of wind and wave, boldly cut features, and melancholy eyes. Those eyes of Philip's were somewhat misleading, as they suggested a poetic nature, steeped in sentimentalism, whereas he was a remarkably matter-of-fact young man, inclined to scoff at the romantic tendencies of his fellow-creatures. By no means expansive or apt to unbosom himself to his friends, this reticence, in conjunction with his romantic appearance, entirely deceived the world as to his true character. His Byronism lay in looks, rather than in actions.

"Thirty is by no means old," mused Sir Philip, absently stroking his moustache, "if anything, it errs on the side of youth, yet I look close on a hundred. Dark people never do wear well. Tim is five years older than I, Peter past thirty-three, but it's probable they look younger than I do. As to Jack – well, Jack is an infant of twenty-eight summers, and I suspect has altered but little. They would hardly recognise me. Possibly I shall have considerable difficulty in recognising them."

He resumed his walk and his soliloquy, reverting therein to his first idea.

"This meeting is a mistake. Beyond the fact that we were at school together, we have nothing in common about which to converse. Different lives, different ideas. We will simply bore one another. Perhaps they are married. Peter was just the kind of boy who would grow into a domesticated man. Jack was romantic, and has probably been captured by a pretty face. Tim! I'm not so sure about Tim. I fancy he is still a bachelor like myself!"

It was his own fault that such was the case, as many a maiden would have gladly married Sir Philip and his Kentish acres. The baronet, however, with but little predisposition to matrimony, fought shy of the marriage ring, and preferred his yacht to all the beauties in Christendom. On rare occasions, he showed himself in Belgravia drawing-rooms, but in the main loved the masculine seclusion of his club, and the lurching deck of *The Bohemian*. It may be that some of his remote ancestors had intermarried with the Romany, and thus introduced a strain of wandering blood into the family; but certain it was that Sir Philip Cassim, in place of being a steady-going country squire, was an irreclaimable Arab in the matter of vagrancy. Cases of atavism occur in the most respectable families.

His nomadic instincts lured him into the dark places of the earth, and, as a rule, he preferred these to the more civilised portions. Humanity in the rough is more interesting than humanity veneered with culture, and in seeking such primevalism, Sir Philip explored many of those barbaric lands which gird our comfortable civilisation. Peru he knew better than Piccadilly; St. James's Street was unknown territory to him compared with his knowledge of Japan, and if his yacht was not skirting the treacherous New Zealand coast, she was certainly battling with the giant billows off the Horn.

Hating conventionalism, and the *leges non scriptæ* of London society, this vagabond by predilection rarely dwelt in the Portman Square family mansion. When he did pay a visit to town, he usually camped out – so to speak, in a club bedroom, and before his friends knew of his whereabouts, would flit away without warning, and be next heard of at Pernambuco, or somewhere about Madagascar. On this special occasion, however, he occupied his town house for the purpose of keeping the appointment made with his three friends fifteen years before on the banks of the Ouse.

On this account, and to avoid the trouble of hiring servants for the few days of his stay, he brought his stewards up from the yacht. These, accustomed to such emergencies, owing to Sir Philip's

whimsical mode of life, speedily rendered a few rooms habitable, and prepared the dinner, which was to celebrate the re-union of the quartette. It seemed strange that Cassim should take all this trouble to fulfil a boyish promise, but as he was a man who did not make friends easily, and moreover was beginning to weary of solitary wanderings, he greatly inclined to a renewal of these youthful friendships. Besides, he cherished a kindly memory of his old school-fellows, and looked forward with genuine pleasure to meeting them again. Yet, as his latter reason savoured of sentimentalism, he would not admit of its existence even to himself – it clashed with his convictions that life was not worth living.

Despite the fact that he was a cosmopolitan, Philip's nature, impressionable in the extreme, was deeply tinged with the prevailing pessimism of the day. He professed that facile disbelief in everything and in everyone, which is so easy to acquire, so difficult to relinquish. Human nature he mistrusted, friendship he scoffed at, and was always on his guard against those with whom he came in contact. Thus living entirely within, and for himself, the real geniality of his disposition became encrusted with the barnacles of a selfish philosophy. This *noli me tangere* creed isolated him from his fellow-creatures – with the result that while he possessed many acquaintances he had no real friends. Thus he created his own misery, he inflicted his own punishment.

Adopting as his motto the saying of the Oxford fine gentleman, "Nothing's new! nothing's true, and no matter," Cassim schooled himself to suppress all outward signs of feeling, and passed through life with a pretended indifference to the things of this world. Pretended! because he really felt deeply and suffered acutely, though pride forbade his showing aught of such mental disturbances to those around him. Perhaps, in seeing so much of the world, he had early exhausted all emotion; but he certainly surveyed everything from Dan to Beersheba with calm indifference. The real man was a genial, kind-hearted creature; the false, a frigidly cold person who accepted all things with ostentatious stoicism.

He was by no means popular with men, as they greatly resented his reserve and haughty demeanour; but women professed to find him charming. Probably they, with the subtle instinct of their sex, saw below the mask of feigned cynicism, and judged him by what he was, not by what he appeared to be. Certainly he never laid himself out to gain their good opinion. He rarely troubled to make himself agreeable; he was not a marrying man (than which there can be no worse crime in a woman's eyes), and led a solitary, vagrant existence; yet, in spite of such social disqualifications, women were his best friends, and defended him loyally from the clumsy sneers of his own sex. Assuredly he should have married, if only out of gratitude for such championship; but he preferred a single life, and in the main eschewed female society.

Withal he was not inclined to undervalue either his personal appearance or his mental capacity. No mean classical scholar, he seldom passed a day without dipping into the charming pages of Horace or Catullus. Of the two he preferred the Veronese, who with Heine and Poe formed his favourite trio of poets, from which names it can be seen that Sir Philip had a taste for the fantastic in literature. He was conversant with three or four modern languages, and was especially familiar with the noble tongue of Castille. A man who can read "Don Quixote" in the original is somewhat of a rarity in England. Those of Philip's acquaintances who could induce him to talk literature and art formed an excellent opinion of his abilities. Moreover, he was unique in one respect. He had circumnavigated the globe, yet had refrained from writing a book of travel.

As to his personal appearance, it was as smart and spruce as that of his yacht. Only those who know how a crack yacht is cherished by her owner can thoroughly understand this comparison. In spite of his solitary existence, Philip was always careful of the outward man, and this attention to his toilet was a notable trait of his character. Yet he was by no means effeminate, foppish, or finical. To sum up, he was a well-dressed, well-bred, cultured Englishman – who had all the qualities – mental, personal, and physical – fitting him to shine with no mean lustre in society, yet he preferred to live the life of a nautical hermit – if such a thing be possible.

Walking constantly to and fro, he glanced every now and then at the clock, the large hand of which was close on seven. Given that all three guests were within a measurable distance of the rendezvous, he began to calculate, from what he knew of their idiosyncrasies, which one of them would be the first to arrive.

"I am certain it will be Peter," decided Cassim, after due reflection; "neat, orderly, punctual Peter, who never missed a lesson, and never came late to class. Tim is careless! Jack is whimsical! If anyone arrives, it will be Dr. Peter Paul Grench. And," he added, as the bell rang, "here he is."

His prognostication proved to be correct, for in a few minutes the door of the study opened to admit a precise little gentleman, in whom Philip had no difficulty in recognising his quondam schoolfellow. It was a trifle larger Peter – it was Peter in evening dress, twirling a pince-nez – Peter with mutton-chop whiskers and a bald head; but it was undeniably Peter Paul Grench, of Bedford Grammar School.

"The child," quoth Philip, advancing to meet his guest, "is father to the man.' It is just on seven, and you, Peter, keep your fifteen-year-old appointment to the minute. I am delighted to see you."

"I am sure the feeling is reciprocal," responded Dr. Grench, primly, as he grasped the baronet's hand; "it is indeed a pleasure to meet an old schoolfellow after these many years."

Peter spoke in a Johnsonian manner, but his words were genuine enough and under the influence of this natural emotion, for the moment he forgot his primness. After a time, however, habit asserted its influence over nature, and Grench resumed his buckram civilities, while Philip, also recovering himself, relapsed into his usual nonchalant manners.

"So you kept this appointment, after all," said Cassim, as they settled themselves for a confidential conversation; "I thought it possible you might have forgotten about it."

"By no means," answered Grench, producing a piece of paper similar to that of Philip's. "I have often looked at this, and always intended, unless prevented by disease or death, to meet my old schoolfellows as agreed. Here we are, my dear friend; but Tim and Jack?"

"May be at the other end of the world, for all I know," responded the baronet, carelessly. "Special correspondents and engineers are the Wandering Jews of to-day. Still, as I came from the Guinea coast for this appointment, they will surely not grudge a lengthy journey for a similar purpose."

"Tim is in London," said Peter, unexpectedly.

"Ah!" remarked Philip, manifesting but little surprise, "you have seen him, then?"

"No! Since we parted at Bedford I have seen none of you; but I have heard of all three."

"Nothing good of me, I am afraid," said Cassim, with that amiable belief in his fellow-creatures which made them love him so.

"Nothing bad, at all events," answered Peter, serenely. "You are constantly travelling; you are still a bachelor; you open your heart to no one, and judge the world as though you were not its denizen."

"Which last remark is stolen from La Rochefoucauld. Yes! Your description is accurate if not original. However, let us not talk of Philip Cassim. I am terribly tired of him. What about Jack and Tim?"

"Of Jack I know nothing, save that he was last heard of in India. Tim, however, wrote to me the other day saying *he* intended to keep this appointment. Concerning his life, he volunteered no information."

"So like Tim! His private correspondence was always unsatisfactory. I like his newspaper letters however; the descriptions are so bright and vivid – plenty of gunpowder and adventure. Certainly Tim makes an excellent war correspondent. I wonder if he still has that strong brogue."

"Surely not. When he came to Bedford, he was fresh from Ireland; but now that he has been travelling so much, he must have lost his pronounced Irishisms."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Philip, with a smile, "Tim is Irish of the Irish. I believe he loves his brogue. You can't educate the race nature out of a man. Believe me, my dear Peter, Tim will be as noisy and as warm-hearted as of yore. I am very fond of Tim."

"Yet I should think Tim, such as you describe him, would be the last person to suit a fastidious individual such as yourself."

"Come now, Peter, I am not quite so hypercritical as all that. Besides, Tim, with all his noise and brogue, is a thorough gentleman. It is your veneered person I object to. However, Tim may have changed. Meanwhile what about yourself?"

"Like Canning's knife-grinder, I have no story to tell. When I left Bedford I went to Cambridge – afterwards came to London. Passed my examinations, walked the hospitals, took my degree, and hearing that a doctor was wanted down at Barnstaple, I went there. For some years I practised with more or less success. Then I retired to give – "

"Retired!" interrupted Philip, in surprise. "Have you made your fortune?"

"By no means. Country doctors never make fortunes. No! I inherit five hundred a year from my father, and as there is no necessity for me to physic people for a livelihood, I devote myself – "

"To sticking pins through unoffending butterflies!"

"Now, how did you guess that?" asked the little doctor, in mild surprise.

"Easily enough. You had a butterfly and beetle mania at school. If I remember rightly, we rolled you in nettles to cure you of entomology. Boys don't relish scientific urchins. So you are still at it. But five hundred a year and beetles. Peter, you are not ambitious."

"No," assented Grench, simply; "I am not at all ambitious. My entomology gives me great pleasure, or why should I not enjoy myself in my own way? Ah, Philip, you do not know what true enjoyment is."

"Certainly not – if it's butterflies."

"To see one of the *Callidryas* species for the first time is indeed a pleasure," said Peter, beaming with scientific rapture. "Then the *Papilios*, the *Hesperidæ* and the red *Timitis* – "

"Oh, oh!" yawned Philip, stretching himself, "how dry it sounds."

"Dry!" echoed Peter, indignantly; "the most fascinating pursuit in the world."

Philip looked kindly at the little man who appeared to be so satisfied with his simple pleasures.

"Decidedly, Peter, you are a happy person. Come with me on a cruise, and I will introduce you to the paradise of butterflies. Tropical America, Peter, where the insects are like flying flowers. Green butterflies, purple beetles, gilded moths – "

"Oh!" cried Peter, opening his eyes with delight, "I should like to go to South America. I would find a peculiar species there, the *Heliconidæ*. Why, Philip, if only – "

"Hark! there's the bell," exclaimed Cassim, rising with alacrity, rather thankful to escape Peter's lecture. "Is it Jack or Tim?"

"Tim," said Peter, promptly, "no one else would ring so violently."

"Where did ye say they were?" cried a hearty Irish voice half way up the stairs.

"That settles it," remarked Philip, comically, as he opened the door; "no two persons can possess such a strong brogue."

And Tim it was. Tim, large and burly, roaring like a Bull of Bashan, who hurled himself into the room, and flung himself on Philip's neck.

"My dear friend! my dear boy!" he thundered, squeezing Cassim in his athletic embrace, "it's glad I am to see you."

"Gently, Tim, gently," gasped Philip, helpless in the hug of this bear; "don't crush me to a jelly."

"And Peter!" exclaimed Tim, releasing the baronet to pounce on the doctor, "you fat little man, how splendid you look."

Warned by the fate of Philip, the doctor skilfully evaded the embrace of the giant, and Tim was only able to demonstrate his affection by a handgrip. He threw all his soul into this latter, and

Peter's face wrinkled up like a monkey's with pain. It was like a fly struggling with an elephant, and Philip, thoroughly roused from his ordinary placidity, laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks.

"As soon as you've quite done murdering us, Tim," he said, placing a chair between himself and his too demonstrative friend, "perhaps you'll give your hat and coat to the servant."

Tim, who had rushed upstairs without pause, meekly delivered the articles in question to the servant, who stood grinning at the door. Looking on this respectful grin as a liberty, Philip frowned at the poor man, who thereupon vanished, while Tim, overcome by his late exertions, fell so heavily into a chair that the room rocked.

"Phew!" he said, wiping his heated brow, "it's hot. I am, anyhow."

"That's scarcely to be wondered at," returned Cassim dryly, "considering the enthusiasm of your greeting."

"And why not?" retorted Tim, with the broadest of brogues; "am I not glad to see you both?"

"Of course; and we are glad to see you," said Peter, examining his crushed hand; "but you needn't maim us for life."

Tim roared with laughter in the most unfeeling manner, and Cassim, with a smile, placed his hand on the giant's shoulder.

"The same noisy Tim as of old," he said kindly; "you were a large boy, Tim, and now you are a large man. I wouldn't have recognised you, though, save for the brogue. It's as strong as ever."

"That's true, anyhow," acknowledged Fletcher placing his huge paw on Philip's slender hand as it rested on his shoulder. "Wasn't I but one term at the school, and that didn't turn it into cockney speaking. Besides, I've been to Cork since."

"To freshen up the accent, I suppose," said Grench, with the air of a man who has made a cutting remark; "but a special correspondent should know more than one language."

"Especially if the language is Irish," finished Cassim, mischievously.

"Get along with you," replied Tim, with a twinkle in his eye; "why, it's a polyglot I am, French, Italian, Spanish, and a touch of Arabic. I can tell lies in any one of them. So here you are, lads. Where's Jack?"

"Lord knows!"

"He was in South America when I heard last; but I'll go bail he'll turn up soon. What is the time?"

"Half-past seven," rejoined Peter, consulting an eminently respectable watch of the family physician species.

Tim took out his piece of paper from a pocket-book commensurate to his size, and smoothed it carefully with his huge hand.

"Seven's the hour, and Jack's late. I never knew him early yet."

"Well, you were not renowned for punctuality at school, Tim!"

"True for you, Philip, and many's the hearing I've had for that same. But this is a special occasion, and Jack should be punctual. Confound him."

"Oh, he'll be here shortly," said Cassim, shrugging his shoulders. "We have plenty to talk about until he arrives. How are you, Tim? But I needn't ask, you look like the giant Goribuster."

"Six foot five in my stockings," replied Tim, complacently; "and a good thing it is for me that same. Special corresponding isn't knocking about the world in a gentleman's yacht, sir."

"Or collecting butterflies," added Philip, with a sly smile at Peter.

"Are you at that rubbish still, Peter?"

"Of course I am," answered Peter, in mild surprise; "in fact, since my father left me five hundred a year, I've devoted myself entirely to entomology."

"And to eating!" said Tim, with a grin. "Why, Peter, you've a paunch like a priest."

"Oh, really!" began Peter, scandalised; but his further protestations were drowned in the laughter of Philip, on hearing which Tim nodded approvingly.

"Come now, my dear friend, that's better. You are more like a Christian than when I last saw you."

"At Bedford?" inquired Philip, still smiling.

"No! In London – no less. Didn't I see you at the theatre six months ago, looking for all the world as if you were attending your own funeral?"

"Why didn't you speak to me?"

"You looked so supercilious and stand-off-the-grass like that I couldn't bring myself to it at all."

"You idiot!" said Philip, colouring with vexation. "You know I am always glad to see you."

"Is that a Chinese invitation, Philip?"

"No; I assure you, Tim. Don't think me such a prig. Why, I came all the way from the Guinea coast just to meet you."

"It's a fine boy you are," said Tim, stretching out his huge hand; "it's only joking I am. If you didn't recognise an old friend, it's thrashing you I'd be, as once I did at school."

"If I remember rightly, it was you who had the worst of that little encounter," retorted Philip, gripping Tim's hand strongly.

"It was a draw," said Peter, suddenly; "I remember the fight quite well. But we can talk of these things again. I want to know what Tim is doing."

"And this is fame," grunted Tim, nodding his head. "Haven't you seen my letters about the Soudan War to *The Morning Planet*, and my account of the Transvaal ructions? Am I not a special correspondent, you ignorant little person?"

"Oh yes, yes; I know all that," replied Peter, impatiently; "but tell us about your life."

"Isn't that my life, sir? When I left school, I went to Ireland and became a reporter. Then I was taken up by a paper in London, and went to the Soudan – afterwards to Burmah, where I was nearly drowned in the Irrawaddy. They know me in Algiers and Morocco. Now I've just returned from Burmah, where I parted with my dear friend, Pho Sa. He's in glory now – rest his soul! They hanged him for being a Dacoit, poor devil."

"You seem to have been all over the world, Tim," said Philip, when the Irishman stopped for breath, "it's queer I never knocked up against you."

"Why, you never stayed one day in one place. That boat of yours is a kind of Flying Dutchman."

"Not a bit of it; she has doubled the Cape lots of times. I was just trying to persuade Peter to take a cruise with me."

"I am seriously thinking of the advisability of doing so," observed Peter, judiciously selecting his words.

"Are you, indeed, Mr. Lindley Murray. Well, if Philip asks me, I'll come too."

"Will you really, Tim?" asked Philip, eagerly.

"Of course I will. There's no war on at present, and I'm not busy. If those squabbling South American Republics don't come to blows again, I'll be free for six months, more or less."

"Then come with me, by all means."

"I tell you what," observed Peter, who had been thinking; "Jack, if he turns up at all, will have travelled home from South America. Let us take him back in Philip's yacht."

"That's not a bad idea anyhow," from Tim, patting Peter's head, a familiarity much resented by the family physician. "You've got brains under this bald spot."

"I am quite agreeable, provided Jack turns up," said Sir Philip, yawning; "but it is now eight o'clock, and I'm hungry. It's no use waiting any longer for Jack, so I vote we have dinner."

"He'll arrive in the middle of it," said Grench, as Cassim touched the bell. "Jack was never in time, or Tim either."

"Don't be taking away my character, you mosquito," cried Tim, playfully, "or I'll put you on the top of the bookcase there. It's a mighty little chap you are, Peter!"

"Well, we can't all be giants!" retorted Peter, resentfully. "I'm tall enough for what I want to do."

"Collecting butterflies! You don't know the value of time, sir. Come along with me to the dining-room." And, in spite of Peter's struggles, he picked him up like a baby, and carried him as far as the study door. Indeed, he would have carried him into the dining-room had not the presence of the servant restrained him. Tim had no idea of the dignity of the medical profession.

The servant intimated that dinner was ready, so the three friends sat down to the meal rather regretting that Jack was not present to complete the quartette. Just as they finished their soup the servant announced —

"Mr. Duval!"

Simultaneously the three sprang up from the table, and on looking towards the door beheld a tall young fellow, arrayed in tweeds, standing on the threshold.

"Jack!" they cried, rushing towards him with unbounded delight. "Jack Duval!"

"My dear boys," said Jack, his voice shaking with emotion; "my dear old friends."

CHAPTER II

THE DEVIL STONE

Spirits dwelling in the zone
Of the changeful devil stone,
Pray ye say what destiny
Is prepared by Fate for me.
Doth the doubtful future hold
Poverty or mickle gold,
Fortune's smile, or Fortune's frown,
Beggar's staff, or monarch's crown?
Shall I wed, or live alone,
Spirits of the devil stone?

See the colours come and go,
Thus foreboding joy and woe;
Burns the red, the blue is seen,
Yellow glows and flames the green,
Like a rainbow in the sky,
Mingle tints capriciously,
Till the writhing of the hues,
Sense and brain and eye confuse,
Prophet priest can read alone
Omens of the devil stone.

Having finished dinner, they repaired to the library, and there made themselves comfortable with coffee and tobacco. Emotion at meeting one another after the lapse of so many years had by no means deprived them of their appetites, and they all did full justice to the excellent fare provided by Philip's cook. So busy were they in this respect that during the meal conversation waxed somewhat desultory, and it was not until comfortably seated in the library that they found time for a thoroughly exhaustive confabulation.

For this purpose the quartette drew their chairs close together, and proceeded to incense the goddess Nicotina, of whom they were all devotees save Peter. He said that tobacco was bad for the nerves, especially when in the guise of cigarettes, which last shaft was aimed at Philip, who particularly affected those evil little dainties abhorred by Dr. Grench. Jack and Tim, to mark their contempt for Peter's counter-blast, produced well-coloured meerschaum pipes, which had circumnavigated the globe in their pockets. Whereat Peter, despairing of making proselytes, held his tongue and busied himself with his coffee – very weak coffee, with plenty of milk and no sugar.

"What an old woman you have become, Peter," said Cassim, watching all this caution with languid interest. "You have positively no redeeming vices. But you won't live any the longer for such self-denial. Tim, there, with his strong coffee and stronger tobacco, will live to bury you."

"Tim suffers from liver!" observed Peter, serenely making a side attack.

"What!" roared Tim, indignantly, "is it me you mean? Why, I never had a touch of liver in my life."

"You'll have it shortly, then," retorted Peter, with a pitying smile. "I'm a doctor, you know, Peter, and I can see at a glance that you are a mass of disease."

All this time Jack had spoken very little. He alone of the party was not seated, but leaned against the mantelpiece, pipe in mouth, with a far-away look in his eyes. While Tim and Peter wrangled over the ailments of the former, Philip, lying back luxuriously in his chair, surveyed his old schoolfellow thoughtfully through a veil of smoke. He saw a greater change in Jack than in the other two.

In truth, Duval was well worth looking at, for, without being the ideal Greek god of romance, he was undeniably a handsome young man. Tim had the advantage of him in height and size, but Jack's lean frame and iron muscles would carry him successfully through greater hardships than could the Irishman's uncultivated strength. Jack could last for days in the saddle; he could sustain existence on the smallest quantity of food compatible with actual life; he could endure all disagreeables incidental to a pioneer existence with philosophical resignation, and altogether presented an excellent type of the Anglo-Saxon race in its colonising capacity. Certainly the special correspondent had, in the interests of his profession, undergone considerable hardships with fair success; but Tim was too fond of pampering his body when among the fleshpots of Egypt, whereas Jack, constantly in the van of civilisation subjugating wildernesses, had no time to relapse into luxurious living. The spirit was willing enough, but the flesh had no chance of indulging.

His face, bronzed by tropic suns, his curly yellow locks, his jauntily curled moustache, and a certain reckless gleam in his blue eyes, made him look like one of those dare-devil, Elizabethan seamen who thrashed the Dons on the Spanish Main. Man of action as he was, fertile in expedients, and constantly on the alert for possible dangers, Jack Duval was eminently fitted for the profession which he had chosen, and could only endure existence in the desert places of the world. This huge London, with its sombre skies, its hurrying crowds, its etiquette of civilisation, was by no means to his taste, and already he was looking forward with relief to the time when he would once more be on his way to the vivid, careless, dangerous life of the frontier.

Philip admired his friend's masculine thoroughness, and could not help comparing himself disadvantageously with the young engineer. Yet Cassim was no weakling of the boudoir; he also had sailed stormy seas, had dared the unknown where Nature fights doggedly with man for the preservation of her virgin solitudes. Still, withal, Jack was a finer man than he was. What were his luxurious travels, his antarctic explorations, in comparison with the actual hardships undergone by this dauntless pioneer of civilisation? Jack was one who did some good in the world; but as for himself – well, Philip did not care about pursuing the idea to its bitter end, as the sequence could hardly prove satisfactory to his self-love. He irritably threw away his cigarette, moved restlessly in his chair, and finally expressed himself in words.

"Why do you come here, Jack, and make us feel like wastrels? A few hours ago and I rather prided myself on myself; but now you make me feel idle, and lazy, and selfish, and effeminate. It's too bad of you, Jack."

Brains were not Duval's strong point, and, unable to understand the meaning of this outburst, he simply stared in vague astonishment at Sir Philip. Tim and the doctor, pausing in their conversation, pricked up their ears, while Cassim, paying no attention to this sudden enlargement of his audience, went on speaking, half peevishly, half good-humouredly.

"I am the enervated type of an effete civilisation. You, my friend, are the lusty young savage to whom the shaping of the future is given. You are Walt Whitman's tan-faced man, the incarnation of the dominating Anglo-Saxon race, ever pushing forward into fresh worlds. As compared with mine, your primæval life is absolutely perfect. The Sybarite quails before the clear glance of the child of Nature. Take me with you into the wilderness, John Duval. Teach me how to emulate the Last of the Mohicans. Make me as resourceful as Robinson Crusoe. I am a prematurely old man, Jack, and I wish to be a child once more."

"What the deuce are you driving at, Philip?" asked practical Jack.

"It's from a book he's writing," suggested Tim, with a laugh.

"Melancholia," hinted Peter, who was nothing if not medicinal.

Philip laughed and lighted a fresh cigarette. Duval ran his hand through his curly locks, pulled hard at his pipe, and delivered himself bluntly.

"I suppose all that balderdash means that you are tired of London."

"Very much so."

"Why, you never stay two days in London," said Peter, in astonishment.

"Neither do I. Don't I tell you I'm tired of it? Be quiet, Peter; I can see that Jack is on the verge of being delivered of a great idea."

"Upon my word, that's cute of you, Philip," exclaimed Jack, admiringly. "Yes, I have a scheme to propound, for the carrying out which I need your assistance – in fact, the assistance of all three."

"This promises to be an interesting conversation," said Cassim, in an animated tone. "Proceed, John Duval, Engineer. What is it you wish us to do?"

"I had better begin at the beginning, gentlemen all."

"That's generally considered the best way," observed Peter, with mild sarcasm.

"Be quiet! you small pill-box. Let Jack speak."

"As I told you at dinner," said Jack, placing his elbows backward on the mantelshelf, "I have been all over the world since I last saw your three faces. China, Peru, New Zealand, India, Turkey – I know all those places, and many others. I have made money; I have lost money; I have had ups and downs; but everywhere I can safely say I've had a good time."

"Same here," murmured Tim, refilling his pipe.

"At present I am in Central America," pursued Jack, taking no notice of the interpolation, "under engagement as a railway engineer to the Republic of Cholocaca."

"Cholocaca?" echoed Tim, loudly; "isn't it there the row's to take place?"

"Why, what do you know about it, Tim?"

"A special correspondent knows a lot of things," returned Fletcher, sagely. "Go on with the music, my boy. I'll tell you something when you've ended."

Jack looked hard at Tim and hesitated, but Philip, curled up luxuriously in his big chair, asked him to proceed.

"You're going to tell an Arabian Night story, Jack."

"Well, it sounds like one."

"Good! I love romance. It's something about buried cities, and Aztecs, and treasure, and the god Huitzilopochtli."

"Oh, bosh! You've been reading Prescott."

"It seems to me," observed Peter, plaintively, "that with all these interruptions we'll never hear the story."

"The first that speaks will be crushed," announced Tim, glaring around. "If you please, Mr. Duval, it's waiting we are."

Jack laughed, and resumed his story.

"While I was at Tlatonac – that is the capital of the Republic – I became mixed up in certain events, political and otherwise. I found I could do nothing I wanted to without assistance; so, as I suddenly remembered our promise to meet here this year, I came straight to London. In fact, I was in such a hurry to find out if you three had remembered the appointment, that I left my luggage at the railway station, and came on by a hansom to Portman Square. This is the reason I am not in evening dress."

"Oh, deuce take your evening dress," said Philip, irritably; "you might have come in a bathing-towel, for all I cared. I didn't want to see your clothes. I wanted to see you. Go on with the story of the buried city."

"How do you know my story is about a buried city?"

"I never heard a romance of Central America that wasn't."

"You'll hear one now, then. This isn't about a city – it's concerning a stone."

"A stone?" echoed his three listeners.

"Yes. An opal. A harlequin opal."

"And what is a harlequin opal, Jack?"

"Tim, I'm astonished at your ignorance. A special correspondent should know all things. A harlequin opal is one containing all the colours of the rainbow, and a few extra ones besides."

"Well, Jack, and this special opal?"

"It's one of the most magnificent jewels in the world."

"Have you seen it?"

Jack drew a long breath.

"Yes; once. Great Scott, what a gem! You fellows can't conceive its beauty. It is as large as a guinea-hen's egg. Milky white, and shooting rays of blue and green, and red and yellow like fireworks. It belonged to Montezuma."

"I thought those everlasting Aztecs would come in," said Philip smiling. "Well, Jack, and what about this stone?"

"Ah, that's a long story."

"What of that? The night's young, and the liquor's plentiful."

"I don't mind sitting up all night, if the story is interesting. Start at once Jack, and don't keep us any longer in suspense. I hate wire-drawn agonies."

"A year ago I was pottering about at Zacatecas, over a wretched little railway that wasn't worth bothering about. Being hard up, I went in for it in default of something better; but meanwhile kept my eyes open to see what I could drop into. After some months, I heard that the Republic of Cholocaca was about to open up the country with railways, so I thought I'd go there to get a job."

"Where is Cholocaca?"

"Down Yucatan way – not far from Guatemala."

"Oh, I know; looks on to Campeche Bay."

"No; on the other side of the neck. Washed by the Carribean Sea."

"I must get you to show it to me on the map," said Philip, finding his geographical knowledge at fault. "I have an idea of its whereabouts, but not of its precise locality. Meanwhile let us continue your adventures."

"When I heard of this prospect at Tlatonac," continued Jack, without further preamble, "I left Zacatecas for Mexico, stayed a few days in the capital, to make inquiries about the Republic. These proving satisfactory, I went on to Vera Cruz, and, fortunately, found a coasting-vessel which took me on to Cholocaca. Considering the ship, I got to my destination pretty sharp. I didn't know a soul in the town when I arrived; but, after a few days, began to pick up a few acquaintances. Among these was Don Miguel Maraquando, a wealthy old Estanciero. He has great influence in Cholocaca, being a member of the Junta, and is regarded by many people as the future president of the Republic."

"That is if Don Hypolito stands out," said Tim, softly.

"Have you heard – " began Jack, when the journalist cut him short.

"I've heard many things, my boy. Later on I'll tell you all I know."

"You seem to be pretty well acquainted with what's going on in Cholocaca," said Jack, after a few moments' reflection; "but I'll tell my story first, and you can tell yours afterwards. Don Miguel became a great friend of mine, and I saw a good deal of him while I stayed at Tlatonac. He is greatly in favour of this railway, which is to be made from the capital to Acauhtzin, a distance of some three hundred and fifty miles. Don Hypolito Xuarez, the leader of the Oposidores, objected to the scheme on the ground that it was utterly unnecessary to run a railway to Acauhtzin when ships could take goods there by water."

"And isn't the man right?" said Tim, indignantly; "what's the use of running a railway along the seacoast?"

"We'll argue that question later on," replied Jack, dryly; "I have my own ideas on the subject, and, as an engineer, I know what I'm talking about. Don Hypolito's objection sounds all right, I have no doubt; but if you look into the matter you will see he hasn't a leg to stand on. Besides, he's only objecting to the railway out of sheer cussedness, because Maraquando won't let him marry Doña Dolores."

"Ah, ah!" observed Philip, who had been listening to the story with great attention, "I was waiting for the inevitable woman to appear on the scene. And who is Doña Dolores?"

"She is Maraquando's ward," replied Jack, colouring a little.

"With whom you are in love?"

"I didn't say that Philip."

"No; but you looked it."

Peter chuckled, whereat Duval turned on him crossly.

"I wish you would stop making such a row, Peter; I can't hear myself speak."

"Well, what about Doña Dolores?" persisted Philip, maliciously.

"Doña Dolores," repeated Jack, calmly, "is the woman whom I hope to make my wife."

At this startling announcement there was a dead silence.

"I congratulate you, Jack," said Cassim, gravely, after a momentary pause. "I hope you will ask us all to your wedding. But what has this story of politics, railways, and love to do with the harlequin opal?"

"Everything. Listen. Don Hypolito is an ambitious man who wants to become Dictator of Cholocaca, and rule that Republic as Dr. Francia did Paraguay. Now, the easiest way in which he can obtain his desire is by marrying Dolores."

"What! Is she the heiress of the Republic?"

"No; but she is the lawful owner of the Chalchuih Tlatonac."

"What, in heaven's name, is that?"

"It means 'the shining precious stone,' in the Toltec tongue."

"The deuce!" murmured Philip, in an amused tone; "we have got past the Aztecs."

"I suppose this shining precious stone is the harlequin opal?" said Peter, inquiringly.

"Precisely. This celebrated stone is hundreds of years old. Tradition says it was the property of Quetzalcoatl."

"That's the Mexican god of the air," said Philip who knew all sorts of stray facts.

"Yes. You've read that in Prescott."

"No, I didn't. Bancroft is my authority. But how did it come into the possession of your Doña Dolores?"

"Oh, she is a direct descendant of Montezuma."

"An Aztec princess. Jack, you are making a royal match."

"I'm afraid there is very little royalty about Dolores," replied Jack, laughing; "but, as regards this stone. Quetzalcoatl gave it to Huitzilopochtli."

"Lord! what names."

"When Cortez conquered Mexico, he found the stone adorning the statue of the war god in his famous teocalli in the city of the Aztecs. One of the Spanish adventurers stole it, and afterwards married a daughter of Montezuma. When she found out that he had the opal, she stole it from him, and went off down south, where she delivered it to some native priest in one of those Central American forests."

"Where it remains still?"

"By no means. This woman had a son by the Spaniard, a Mestizo, as they call this mixture of Indian and Spanish blood. He, I believe, claimed the stone as his property whereon the high priest of Huitzilopochtli proposed to sacrifice him. Not being a religious man, he disliked the idea, and ran away, taking the stone with him. He reached the coast, and married a native woman. There they set

up a temple on their own account to the god of war, and round it, as time went on, grew a settlement, which was called after the opal 'Chalchuih Tlatonac.' Then the Spaniards came and conquered the town, which they rechristened Puebla de Nuestra Señora de la Concepcion; but the name didn't catch on, and it is now known by its old Indian name of Tlatonac. Of course there are a good many Spaniards there still; descendants of the Conquistadores; but the majority of the population are Indians."

"And what became of the opal?"

"Well, as the Spaniards tried to get hold of it, the Indians took it inland to one of their forest retreats. The descendants of Montezuma, however, are still supposed to be its guardians, and, when one owner dies, the opal is brought secretly to Tlatonac, and shown to the new possessor; then it is taken back to its forest sanctuary."

"Where did you see it?" asked Philip, curiously.

"That's the whole point of the story," answered Jack, thoughtfully. "The son of Montezuma's daughter married a native woman, as I told you; their son, however, married a Spanish lady, and so the race was continued. Off and on, they married Indian and Spaniard. This mixing of race isn't good, from a philoprogenitive point of view, and Dolores is the last descendant of the original owner of the opal. Therefore, she is its guardian, and that is the reason Don Hypolito wants to marry her."

"He wishes to obtain the stone as a wedding dowry?"

"Yes. This Chalchuih Tlatonac is an object of superstitious veneration to the Indians. They are supposed to be converted; but they all more or less cling to their old beliefs. In one of these mysterious forests stands a temple to Huitzilopochtli, and there a good many of them go in secret to consult the opal. How they consult it I don't know, unless by its changing colours. Now, if Hypolito marries Dolores, through her he might seize the stone. If he becomes its possessor, he could do what he pleased with the Indian population. As they greatly outnumber the Spanish element, he would use them to raise himself to the Dictatorship of Cholacaca."

"Then he doesn't love the girl?"

"Not a bit," replied Jack, viciously; "all he wants is to marry her, and thus gain possession of the devil stone. Besides, apart from the use it would be to him, from a superstitious point of view, he would like to obtain the stone for its own sake. It is a magnificent gem."

"Has he seen it also?"

"Yes; at the same time as I did. Dolores' father died, and she became the ward of her uncle Don Miguel. I was a good deal about the house, and naturally enough fell in love with her."

"Jack! Jack!"

"You'll fall in love with her, yourself, Philip, when you see her; she's an angel."

"Of course. You say that because you are in love with her. Does she return your love?"

"Yes; she is as fond of me as I am of her."

"And what does Don Miguel, the proud hidalgo, say?"

"He says nothing, because he knows nothing," said Jack, promptly; "we haven't told him yet. However, when Dolores and myself found out we loved one another, she told me all about this Chalchuih Tlatonac, and how she expected it was to be shown to her, according to custom. A few nights afterwards the priest arrived secretly, and showed her the stone. While she was holding it up, I entered the room suddenly with Don Hypolito. We saw the opal flashing like a rainbow in her hand. By Heaven, boys, I never saw such splendour in my life. We only had a glimpse of it, for as soon as the old priest saw us he snatched it out of her hand and bolted. I followed, but lost him, so the opal went back to the forest temple; and Lord only knows where that is."

"Doesn't Doña Dolores know?"

"No; nobody knows except the priests. They meet the worshippers on the verge of the forest and blindfold them before leading them to the shrine."

"And how did Don Hypolito find out Dolores was the guardian of the opal?" asked Peter, after a pause.

"Oh, the story is common property. But the opal isn't of much value to Dolores. She is called its guardian, but has nothing to do with it. Now I suppose she'll never see it again."

"It's a queer story anyhow," observed Tim, reflectively; "I would like to see that jewel."

"That's what I've come to see you all about," said Jack, excitedly. "I want you all to come with me to Cholocaca, and help me to marry Dolores, and get the devil stone."

The three remained silent, and a shade of disappointment passed over Duval's face.

"Of course, if you fellows don't care, I – "

"Wait a moment, Jack," interrupted Philip, slowly. "Don't jump to conclusions. You want us to go to Central America?"

"Yes."

"And upset Don Hypolito's little plans?"

"Exactly."

"Speaking for myself," said Philip, quietly, "there is nothing I should like better. I am with you, Jack. But Peter – "

"Oh, I'll come too," said the doctor, serenely, "if it's only to collect butterflies. While I'm on the spot, I may as well help. There's sure to be fighting, and I can attend to the wounded. You can depend upon me, Jack; I'll be your family physician, and physic the lot of you."

"Bravo!" cried Jack, his face lighting up as he grasped a hand of each. "And what do you say, Tim?"

"Your story is queer," remarked Tim, solemnly; "but mine is queerer. I'll go with the greatest of pleasure, Jack; but it so happens I'm going out to the same place for *The Morning Planet*."

"What?"

"It's a coincidence, anyhow, Jack. I told you I knew about Don Hypolito."

"You did."

"Have you seen the evening papers?"

"No; I was too excited at the idea of meeting you fellows to bother about reading."

"You are an ignorant person. While you've been fast in coming here, the telegraph's been faster. From all accounts, there's going to be a shindy in Cholocaca."

"Dolores!" gasped Jack, turning pale.

"Oh, you needn't be distressful," said Fletcher, hastily; "there's nothing much up as yet. I saw the telegram myself this morning. Don Hypolito has left Tlatonac, and gone to that other town – what d'y'e call it? 'Tis on the tip of my tongue."

"Acauhtzin."

"Yes, that's the name. 'Tis said he's trying to stir up a row; but there's no news of any consequence, at all!"

"You've been ordered to the front, then, Tim?" said Philip, quickly.

"You've hit it, my boy! I was in the office this morning, and the editor called me in. 'D'y'e want a trip?' says he. 'I don't mind,' says I. 'There's going to be trouble again in South America,' says he. 'What!' says I, 'are the Peruvians at it again?' 'No,' says he, 'it's Cholocaca.' 'And where's that?' says I. 'It's more nor I know,' says he. 'Find out on the map, and hold yourself in readiness to go.' So I left him at once, and looked up the map; found out all I could about the place, and at any minute I'm expecting to be sent off."

"Jove! how curious," said Jack, reflectively. "I didn't expect Don Hypolito to cause trouble quite so soon; but I saw things were shaping that way. It's strange, Tim, that you should be going to the very place I wish you to go to. But Philip and Peter won't like to come now."

"It doesn't make the slightest difference to me," said Philip, coolly. "In fact, like Xeres, I'm longing for a new pleasure. I've never been in a war, and should like the novelty of the thing. As to Peter! he's coming to resume his profession on the battle-field."

"But what about my butterflies?" remonstrated Peter, who did not exactly relish the idea of being put in the forefront of the battle. He objected to the role of Uriah.

"Oh, you can do all that sort of thing between times. The main thing is to get the better of Don Hypolito, and help Jack."

"Very well, Philip," said the little man meekly. "I'll come."

"But your practice," hesitated Jack, not liking to be selfish.

"Why, the poor little man hasn't got one," laughed Tim, digging Peter in the ribs. "Hasn't he killed his patients long ago, and is now starving on five hundred a year, poor soul."

"It's very kind of you all!" said Duval, looking at his three friends. "But I feel that I'm leading you into trouble."

"Not me," declared Tim, stoutly, "'tis the *Morning Planet's* to blame, if I peg out."

"And I want some excitement," said Philip, gaily; "and Peter wants butterflies; don't you, doctor? We're all free agents in the matter, Jack, and will go with pleasure."

"How strange," said Peter, pensively; "we little thought at Bedford that –"

"Peter, don't be sentimental," interrupted the baronet, jumping up. "We little thought our meeting would bring us good luck, if that is what you mean. I'm delighted at this new conquest of Mexico."

"We must start at once, Philip."

"My dear Jack, we shall start the day after to-morrow, in my yacht. She's lying down at Yarmouth, in the Isle of Wight, and is ready to get steam up at a minute's notice."

"Is she a fast boat?"

"Fast!" echoed Philip, indignant at the imputation; "she's the fastest steam-yacht afloat. Wait till she clears the Channel, then you'll see what a clean pair of heels she can show."

"The quicker the better. I don't want to arrive at Tlatonac and find Dolores missing."

"You won't find a hair of her head touched. You shall marry her, Jack, and inherit the harlequin opal, and go and be priest to Huitzilopochtli, if you like. Now have a glass of wine."

Tim, who was always handy when liquor was about, had already filled the glasses and solemnly handed them to his friends.

"To the health," said Tim, standing up huge and burly, "of the future Mrs. Duval."

The toast was drunk with acclamation.

CHAPTER III

"THE BOHEMIAN."

Come, lads, and send the capstan round,
Oh, Rio! Rio!
Our good old barkey's outward bound,
Oh, Rio! Rio!
So, shipmates, all look sharp and spry,
To Poll and Nancy say good-bye,
And tell them, if they pipe their eye,
We're bound for Rio Grande.

The old man drank his grog and swore,
Oh, Rio! Rio!
He'd stay no longer slack ashore,
Oh, Rio! Rio!
"Come, tumble up, my lads," sez he,
"An' weigh the anchor speedily,
In twenty days the Cross we'll see,
We're bound for Rio Grande."

"What do you think of her?" asked Philip, with justifiable pride.

"She's as near perfection as can be," replied Jack, enthusiastically; "no two opinions about that, old fellow."

The Bohemian was a superbly modelled craft, and well deserved their admiration as she lay in Yarmouth Harbour, Isle of Wight. Schooner rigged fore and aft, she was close on two hundred tons yacht measurement, and one of the smartest vessels of her kind in British waters. Putting aside her speed when the screw was spinning, she was renowned for her sailing capabilities. With all sails set, and a fair wind, she could smoke through the water at the rate of fifteen knots an hour. Thanks to her owner's wandering proclivities, she was well known in every civilised port, and a good many savage anchorages had also seen her graceful form glide into their smooth waters.

Some said that her engines were too powerful for her frame; and, indeed, when all her furnaces were going, the boat quivered from stem to stern at every rise and fall of the cranks. Philip, however, rarely used the full power of her screw, as it was quite unnecessary; but when she did fire up to the extent of her furnace accommodation, her speed was something wonderful. Sometimes the baronet used the screw, more often the sails; and, with her white wings spread like summer clouds, *The Bohemian*, leaning to leeward rode the surges like a Venus of the foam. Taper masts, splendid spars, cotton-white cloths, she looked a thing of beauty as she swirled through the sea in a smother of foam. She was the pride of Philip's heart, and whether becalmed in the doldrums or seething through troubled waters in the heel of the trade, was well worthy of her owner's admiration.

Jack was scarcely less enthusiastic. He knew more of the land than of the sea, and this was the first time he had ever had the opportunity of inspecting a crack yacht. It was impossible not to admire her milk-white decks, her well-polished brasses, and the general spruceness of her whole appearance. Philip attended thoroughly well to her wants, and despite her frequent voyagings in stormy seas, she always looked as though she had just left dry dock. When the screw thrashed the water into silver froth, and the black smoke poured from the wide funnel, *The Bohemian* knew what was expected

of her, and put her heart into her work. In such a craft it was impossible that a voyage could be otherwise than pleasant, and Jack looked forward to having a thoroughly jolly run to Yucatan with his old schoolfellows.

As has before been stated, they were at Yarmouth. Not that land-and-water Norfolk puddle, but the quaint little seaport in the Isle of Wight. It was famous enough in the old days, and in the reign of our second Charles, the governor of the island made it his head-quarters. Now his old residence is turned into an hotel, and in comparison with Cowes and Ryde, this once populous town is a mere village. With its narrow streets, and antique houses, and indolent townsfolk, it has an old-world air, and is still affected by some yachtsmen at the time when the Solent is full of graceful boats. Philip was very fond of this out-of-the-way seaport, and generally left *The Bohemian* in its harbour when he wished to run up to town.

After that famous dinner, the four friends separated in order to prepare for the voyage. As they had only one clear day in which to do all things, there was little time to be lost. Peter started for Barnstaple by the early train, in order to arrange his affairs, and, to save time, Philip agreed to pick him up at Plymouth. The special correspondent went straight to his chief, and told him of his desire to start for Cholocaca at once; so, as it seemed pretty certain that the difference between Don Hypolito and the Government would culminate in a civil war, Tim duly received his orders. Now he was flying round town collecting needful articles for his campaign, and was expected down by the early train.

On his part, Jack had absolutely nothing to do in London. He already possessed all necessities, and had neither the money nor the inclination to buy things he did not want. Indeed, leaving the bulk of his belongings in Tlatonac, he had arrived in England with but a single portmanteau, which had been left at the station. Philip carried the homeless wanderer to his club, and put him up for the night, and next day they took themselves and the solitary portmanteau down to Yarmouth, where they soon made themselves comfortable on board the yacht. All things being thus arranged, they only waited Tim's arrival to leave for Plymouth, from whence, after taking Peter on board, *The Bohemian* could bear away westward in the track of Columbus.

With all his indolence Philip was no dilettante yachtsman, to leave everything to his sailing master, and thoroughly believed in looking after things himself. After displaying the beauties of his boat to Jack, he busied himself with seeing about stores, and making sure that all was in order for the voyage. While the baronet was thus engaged, Jack wandered over the yacht in a musing sort of fashion, thinking not so much of the scene around him as of Dolores and of the possible events now happening at Tlatonac.

He had good reason to mistrust Don Hypolito knowing as he did how treacherous and cruel was the nature of that would-be dictator. Half Indian, half Spanish, this Mestizo possessed the worst traits of both races, and, once his passions were aroused, would stop at nothing to accomplish his desire. It was true that it was principally on account of the opal that he desired to marry Doña Dolores; but he was also in love with her beauty, and adored her in a sensual, brutish fashion, which made Jack grind his teeth and clench his hands at the very thought. Yet he was undeniably a clever man, and skilled in diplomatic intrigue; therefore it might be that his revolt against the established Government of Cholocaca would end in his assuming the dictatorship. In such an event, he would certainly force Dolores to become his wife; and against his power the Englishman would be able to do nothing. Still, as he had now the aid of his three friends, Duval hoped, if it came to the worst, to escape with Dolores and the opal in Philip's yacht. Once on the open sea, and they could laugh at Xuarez and his threats. The engines of *The Bohemian* were not meant for show.

What Jack feared was that Don Hypolito might have resorted to strong measures, and carried off Dolores with him to Acauhtzin. Hitherto there had been no suspicion that he intended to revolt; so, lulled by a sense of false security, Dolores might have permitted herself to be kidnapped, in which case Jack hardly knew what to do. Still, it might be that nothing had happened save the withdrawal of Xuarez to Acauhtzin, and Duval fervently hoped that he and his friends might arrive at Tlatonac

before the out-break of hostilities. Provided he started fair with Xuarez in the game, Jack hoped to come off winner – Dolores, the opal, and the Republic, being the stakes.

"If we start to-morrow, it will not be long before we reach Chalcacaca," thought Jack, as he leaned over the taffrail looking absently at the dull-hued water. "Once there, and I will be able to protect Dolores. If the worst comes, there is always Philip's yacht, and as to marriage, I am sure Maraquando would rather see his niece married to me than to that Xuarez half-bred."

"In a brown study, Jack?" said Cassim's voice, behind him. "I won't give a penny for your thoughts, for they are worth more."

"How do you know that?"

"Because you are thinking of Doña Dolores."

"It's a true bill," replied Jack, with an ingenuous blush. "I was hoping she had not been carried off to Acauhtzin by that scoundrel Xuarez."

"Oh, your friend Don Hypolito! Not a bit of it. If all you say is correct, he is in too serious a position, at present, to hamper himself with a woman. Don't worry, fond lover. *The Bohemian* will take us to Central America in less than no time, and if there's going to be a row, we'll be there to see its genesis."

"I hope and trust so," said Duval, gloomily; "but I'm not so hopeful as you are."

"I hopeful! My dear lad, I'm the most pessimistic person in existence; but at this moment I look at things from a common-sense point of view. If Xuarez intends business, he has withdrawn to Acauhtzin to make his plans. To do so, he requires time. If he had kidnapped Doña Dolores, things would be brought to a head before his plans were ripe. Therefore he has not kidnapped her. Q.E.D. So come ashore, and don't talk nonsense."

"Have you finished your business?" asked Jack, following Sir Philip into his boat.

"Yes, everything is right. As soon as Tim arrives, we shall start for Plymouth, to pick up Peter. I wish Tim would come down to-night; but I suppose even a special correspondent must have time to collect his traps."

"What is your reason for going ashore?"

"In the first place, I wish to send a wire to my lawyer, as to my destination; and, in the second, I desire to stretch my legs. Let us have as much dry land as we can get. It will be nothing but sea for the next week or so."

"Have you been long ashore, this time?" asked Duval, as they went up to the telegraph-office.

"Only five or six days. I came from the Guinea coast, I tell you, to keep this appointment. I didn't then know it would result in a Central American expedition."

"I hope you are not regretting your determination?"

"My dear Jack, I am delighted. I have not yet seen a war, so it will be something new. Now then, Messrs. Bradshaw and Co.," he added, poising his pen over the telegraph form, "I had better tell you where I am to be found. How do you spell Tlatonac, Jack?"

"T-l-a-t-o-n-a-c," spelt Jack, slowly; "but why don't you write your lawyer a letter, instead of sending an unsatisfactory telegram."

"I have nothing to write about," replied Philip, signing his name with a flourish; "all they need know is where I am in case of my possible death, so as to make things right for the next-of-kin. They have no letters to forward. I always carry plenty of money, so I never bother my head about them, beyond giving my bare address."

"Don't they object to such unbusiness-like habits?"

"They did at first, but finding objections of no use, have quite given up such preachings. Don't trouble any more about them, but let us take a walk. 'You take a walk, but you drink tea,' saith Samuel Johnson."

"I don't see the connection," said Jack, soberly.

"Neither do I; but what matters. 'Dulce est desipere in loco.' There is a bit of dictionary Latin for your delectation."

"Peter said you were a misanthrope, Philip; but I don't think so myself."

"Peter is a – collector of butterflies," retorted Philip, gaily. "I *was* a misanthrope; man delighted me not, nor woman neither; but now I have met the friends of my youth, I feel much better. The friends we make in life are never as dear as those we make at school. Since leaving Bedford I have made none. I have lived for my yacht and in my yacht. Now that I have you, and Tim, and Peter, I feel that I am rapidly losing the character for Timonism. Like Mr. Bunthorne, I am a reformed character."

"Who is Mr. Bunthorne? a friend of yours?"

"Jack, Jack! you are a sad barbarian. It is a character in one of Gilbert and Sullivan's operas. But you have lived so long among savages that you don't know him; in fact, I don't believe you know who Gilbert and Sullivan are."

"Oh yes, I do. I'm not so ignorant as all that."

"There is balm in Gilead then," said Cassim, satirically. "Jack, when you marry Dolores, and realise the opal, you must return to civilisation. I can't let the friend of my youth dwell among the tombs any longer."

"I am very happy among the tombs."

"I know you are. You would be happy anywhere," rejoined Philip, enviously. "Would I were as easily contented. Tell me how to be happy, Jack."

"Get married," returned Jack, promptly.

"Married!" echoed Cassim, as though the idea were a new revelation; "that is a serious question, Jack, which needs serious discussion. Let us sit down on this soft turf, my friend, and you shall give your opinions regarding matrimony. You don't know anything about it as yet; but that is a mere detail."

By this time, owing to their rapid walking, they had left Yarmouth far behind, and having turned off the high-road, were now strolling across a field yellow with gorse. In a few minutes they arrived at a land-slip where the earth fell suddenly down to the beach. The brow of this was covered with soft grass, starred with primroses, and Philip threw himself down thereon with a sigh of content. Jack more soberly seated himself by the side of his friend, and for a few moments they remained silent, gazing at the scene. Below was the rent and torn earth, on either side a scanty fringe of trees, and in front the blue sea stretching far away towards the dim line of the Hampshire coast. A gentle wind was blowing, the perfume of the wild flowers came delicately on its wings, and they could hear the waves lapping on the beach below, while occasionally a bird piped in the near boughs. It was very cool, pastoral and pleasant, grateful enough to Jack's eyes, weary of the burning skies, and the gorgeous efflorescence of the tropics. Ah me! how often we sigh for green and misty England in the lands of the sun.

"There is no land like England," quoted Jack, absently smelling a pale primrose. "Ah! there is no doubt it is the most delightful country in the whole world. I have been all over the planet, so I ought to know."

"And yet you propose to leave the land you profess to love," said Philip, rolling himself over so as to catch his friend's eye. "Jack, you are inconsistent."

"I must earn my bread and butter. Everyone isn't born like you, with a silver spoon in his mouth. If I can't find employment in England, I must go abroad. Besides, there is always Dolores."

"Of course," assented Philip, gravely, "there is always Dolores. Is she pretty, Jack?"

"Pretty!" echoed Duval, with huge disdain; "if there is one adjective that does *not* describe Dolores it is 'pretty.' She's an angel."

"Such a vague description. Fra Angelica, Burne Jones, Gustave Doré, all paint angels differently."

"Oh, I don't mind being more minute, if you care to listen. But I do not wish to bore you with my love affairs."

"I like to be bored with love affairs – when they are those of Jack Duval."

Jack smiled thankfully. He was eager to talk of Dolores to Philip; but being somewhat sensitive to ridicule, hesitated as to whether he should do so. As a rule, a man's friends do not care about listening to a lover's ravings. Women are the most sympathetic in such a case; but as Jack had no female friend in whom to confide, he had either to hold his tongue or tell Philip. Philip, he thought, would not care for descriptions of the beloved one, so he kept silent; but now that he had been warmly requested to be as explicit as he pleased, he eagerly hastened to unbosom himself. At that moment, Jack thought Philip an angel of sympathy.

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