

FERGUS HUME

**THE HARLEQUIN
OPAL**

GOTHIC CLASSIC

Fergus Hume

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CHAPTER I. CHUMS.

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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 Winthrop 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 Irriwaddy. 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.

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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 Cholacaca."

"Cholacaca?" 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 Cholacaca," 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?"