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The Harlequin Opal

by

Fergus Hume

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 scriptae* 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

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 counterblast, 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 Cholacaca, 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 Cholacaca.”

“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’ye 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’ye 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 Cholacaca.’ ‘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 townfolk, 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 Chalcacaca 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, poised 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.

“Dolores,” he began slowly, fixing his eyes seaward, “is rather tall, with a charming figure. Her hair is purple black, her face oval, and her complexion inclined to be darkish. She has teeth like pearls, and a mouth like Cupid’s bow. Her eyes—well, her eyes,” said Jack, enthusiastically, “are like those velvety dark pansies when the dew lies on them.”

“That’s the first original epithet you’ve used, Jack. Teeth of pearl, and Cupid’s bow for a mouth are old similes. Dew on pansies is distinctly good.”

“Oh, if you are going to laugh—” began Jack, angrily, when Cassim hastened to disclaim any such discourtesy.

“I’m not laughing, my dear lad. I am only complimenting you on your ingenuity. I know exactly what kind of a woman Dolores is. She is like De Musset’s Marquise—half fiend, half angel.”

“I never heard of her,” interrupted Duval, bluntly, as he produced a gold oval from his pocket; “but, to save further description, look at this picture. It was done for me by a Spanish fellow at Tlatonac.”

Philip surveyed the portrait in the locket long and earnestly.

“Has Dolores a temper, Jack?”

“Rather!” replied Jack, laconically; “but what do you think of her?”

“She has an exquisite face, and, judging from her mouth, a fiery temper. I don’t wonder you are in love with her, Jack. I hope she’ll make you a good wife.”

“You seem rather doubtful on that point,” said Jack, half annoyed, as he restored the locket to his waistcoat pocket.

“No; but to tell you the truth, I’m doubtful of the advisability of mixed marriages in the matter of race. It may be all very well for the offspring, who, as a rule, are clever; but the husband and wife, having different trainings, do not as a rule hit it off. Race-nature again, my friend.”

“Oh, as to that,” rejoined Jack, equably, “I have lived so long in Mexico and South America that I am half Spanish in my habits, and so can suit myself to Dolores. Besides, when we are married, we will stay in Spanish America; it will be more advisable than coming to England.”

“Yes; I agree with you there,” said Philip, lazily; “in fact, I think the indolent Creole life of South America would suit me also. I also must find an Indian-Spanish spouse. And that reminds me, Jack, that we sat down to discuss my marriage prospects, whereas we’ve done nothing but talk about yours.”

“Well, suppose you marry Doña Eulalia?”

“What, have you found me a spouse already?” cried Cassim, sitting up, with a ringing laugh. “And who, is Doña Eulalia?”

“The cousin of Dolores, and the daughter of Don Miguel.”

“Is she as beautiful as her cousin? But there, I needn’t ask that. Of course, in your eyes, no one is so perfect as Dolores. Well, I will consider the matter when I see Eulalia. It is too important a step to take without due consideration.”

“What nonsense you talk, Philip.”

“Why shouldn’t I talk nonsense? Between you and me, Jack, I grow weary at times of very sensible people. We won’t discuss how that remark applies to you. Tell me how many more members there are of the Maraquando family.”

“Only a son, Don Rafael.”

“And what does the young hidalgo?”

“He is in the Cholocacan navy. A very jolly young fellow of twenty-five. We are great friends. Then there is a Doña Serafina.”

“Another beauty?”

“According to her own idea, very much so,” replied Jack, dryly. “She is the old man’s sister, and acts as duenna to Dolores and Eulalia.”

“Ah, an old maid. Good! We will marry her to Peter, and they can collect butterflies together.”

“Oh, Doña Serafina would marry anyone; but why to Peter?”

“I don’t know. Peter looks as if he needed a wife; so, as he won’t choose one for himself, I must do so for him. Oh,” yawned Philip, rising reluctantly to his feet, “what a pleasant talk we have had. I suppose it’s time we returned to the boat? Come, John, I’ll race you to the road.”

Nothing loth, Jack accepted the challenge at once, and, though Philip ran like a deer, succeeded in beating him easily.

“Whew!” gasped Cassim, leaning breathless against a fence which verged on the high-road. “You’re one too many for me, Jack. I thought I was a good runner, but you can beat me.”

“You’re out of training. Too much flesh. Too soft muscles.”

“Well, I’ll soon right all that at Cholocaca, when we run from the enemy. Constant life on a yacht isn’t a good thing to develop a fellow’s running powers.”

They jumped lightly over the fence, and walked soberly towards Yarmouth in the gathering dusk. The sun was setting, and there was a glory over sea and land somewhat tempered by the twilight. The friends strolled comfortably along, still talking. Indeed, since their meeting they had done little else but talk, more especially Philip, who was not like the same man. His reserve seemed to have melted away like dew before the sun of Duval’s geniality, and he was more like the merry boy of old than the haughty, distrustful man of the present. The reason of this lay in the fact that he felt he could thoroughly trust Jack, and it was a great comfort to him that there was at least one man in the world to whom he could open his heart unreservedly. Secretly, he was much astonished at the pleasure he found in this friendship, and by no means displeased, for while in Jack’s company the world seemed a goodly place in which to dwell. Yet Duval was decidedly a commonplace young man, smart enough at his business, yet by no means distinguished for intellectuality; withal, so warm-hearted and simple-natured, that Philip surrendered himself entirely to the influence of this pleasant friendship.

“You are doing me no end of good, Jack,” he said as they walked through the town. “Before you came, I was gradually becoming a fossil; now I am renewing my youth.”

“I am very glad to hear it,” replied Jack simply. “But indeed, Philip, so far as I can see, you seem to be as jolly as a sandboy.”

“I wasn’t a week ago. It’s the sunshine of your happy geniality, Jack. I will stay with you until the cure is complete. Then I will see you safely married to Dolores; present you with the opal stone, as a dowry, and then—”

“And then!” repeated Jack, as his friend paused.

“Then I will take up the old discontented life again.”

“I won’t let you do that,” said Duval, slipping his arm within that of Philip’s. “No. I will cure you, as you say, and then you will marry Eulalia.”

“Humph! That’s doubtful.”

“I’m not so sure about that, *mi amigo*. Meanwhile, I’m hungry, so let us go on board and have dinner.”

“Oh, bathos,” laughed Philip, but offered no opposition to so sensible a suggestion.

They sat up late that night talking of many things, but principally about Dolores and Tlatonac. Jack gave his friend a vivid description of the Cholocacan capital, and of the life therein, all of which was highly appreciated by Philip. The baronet’s taste in existence, as in literature, leaned towards the dreamy and fantastical, so the languorous life of Spanish America in sleepy towns, amid the dilapidated pomp of former splendours, appealed greatly to the imaginative side of his nature. Hitherto his visits to these out-of-the-way places had been limited to a few days ashore, while his yacht was anchored in the harbour; but this time he determined to take Jack for his guide, and live the life of these strange people. It was a dream of the Orient in a new world. The Arabian Nights in the west.

Next morning they were up early in order to greet Tim, who duly arrived in a state of great excitement. He was delighted to be once more on the war-path, especially as he was to go through the campaign in the

company of his old school-fellows. The business of putting his luggage on board took but little time, as Tim did not believe in special correspondents travelling with much impedimenta.

“You could have brought more luggage, if you had liked,” said Philip, when they inspected Tim’s modest kit.

“More! Haven’t I got all I want,” retorted Tim, indignantly. “What would I be stuffing up the boat with rags for. A tooth-brush and a clean collar is all I require.”

“Hardly, if this is going to be a lengthy campaign,” replied Philip, dryly. “I expect, before the end of the voyage, you’ll be wearing Peter’s clothes.”

Peter was so small, and Tim so large, that the idea struck the latter as wonderfully ludicrous, and he sat down to laugh which he continued to do until the screw began to beat the water. Then he went on deck to superintend the departure.

In due time they arrived at Plymouth without accident, where they found Peter waiting with as much luggage as a bride would take on her honeymoon. It proved to be mostly articles for capturing butterflies, and cases for preserving them much to the disgust of Philip, who hated his yacht to be overloaded with such *débris*. With that painful candour which prevailed between them, he told Peter that he would only take half; but the meek doctor waxed indignant, and refused to go without all these, what he called, “necessaries.” So, in the end, Philip had to give in.

Then *The Bohemian* turned her prow westward, and dipping her nose in the salt brine, followed in the track of Columbus.

Chapter IV In The Track Of Columbus

Spread sails, out oars, the galley’s beak
Points westward where the sunset dies.
The fabled land of gold we seek,
Which glows beneath the tropic skies,—
A jewelled land of Paradise;
The waters round our prow are curled,
White foam bells streak their turquoise blue,
We leave behind the ancient world,
To seek the new.

Spread sails, out oars, a path of gold
Streams from the sinking sun at eve,
As those bold mariners of old,
Again romances wild we weave,
Of splendours we would fain believe;
Yon path leads on to fairyland,
Which glows within the sunset’s heart,
We anguish for that magic strand,
And so depart.

Notwithstanding the notoriety of the Atlantic Ocean for storms, *The Bohemian* met with little or no bad weather during her voyage to Cholocaca. Blue skies, blue seas and fair winds, it was an ideal cruise, and

had it not been necessary to reach Tlatonac with as little delay as possible, Philip would willingly have prolonged this ocean tramping for an indefinite period. Jack, however, was anxious to see Dolores; the special correspondent looked forward eagerly to the fierce delights of possible battles, and Peter hankered after the insect tribes of Central America; so, in deference to their wishes, Philip made his yacht act well up to her reputation as a fast boat. *The Bohemian* did not belie her fame, and made a bee-line straight for her destination.

Ignoring Lisbon, where boats generally touch on their way to South America, the yacht held on straight for the Azores, passed them in the night, and continued her course to Cuba, from whence she could drop down to Tlatonac in a few days. She touched at Havana, which was a trifle out of her course, at the express request of Jack, who had a few commissions to fulfil for Dolores; otherwise her nearest point of call would have been Kingston, in the Island of Jamaica.

Truly there are worse lots in the world than a lotus-eating existence on board a crack yacht, and none of the four friends found the voyage too long or too dull. Peter attended to his entomological traps; Tim, obeying his journalistic instincts, made notes of daily events for future use; and Philip, in conjunction with his sailing master, attended to the navigation of the boat. The only idle person on board was Jack Duval, who did nothing but eat, sleep, drink, and think of Dolores, save when he amused himself by worrying his busier companions.

Thanks to the powerful engines of *The Bohemian* and the uniform speed at which they were kept the whole time, the voyage to the Caribbean Sea was accomplished in a wonderfully short period. Occasionally, when the bearings of the engines became heated by constant friction, the screw was stopped and the sails were set, when the yacht, leaning slightly to one side, swirled through the waters under a cloud of canvas. They depended chiefly on steam power, however, and it was rarely that the drum of the screw ceased resounding through the vessel as she held on steadily westward in the eye of the sunset.

All four friends had plenty to do and plenty to talk about, so managed to get through the days in a sufficiently pleasant fashion. After dinner, which was the principal event of the twenty-four hours, they sat on deck chatting in the warm tropic nights, or else stayed in the saloon listening to Philip's piano playing and Jack's singing. Tim also sang in a pleasant tenor voice, and often favoured the company with a varied selection of ditties, ranging from pathetic Irish melodies to the latest music-hall songs of the day. Peter was the most unmusical member of the party, and, save talking, did little else to amuse his friends. It is true that he offered to give them a lecture on "lepidopterous moths," but the offer was promptly refused on the score that it would be dull. Peter could not understand such an adjective being applied to so interesting a subject.

It was at one of these symposiums that Jack gave them a description of the political situation in Cholocaca, information peculiarly acceptable to Tim, who was anxious to be thoroughly acquainted with the local affairs of the country. On reaching Tlatonac, he wrote a capital article embodying Jack's information, and sent it off at once to *The Morning Planet*, in whose columns it duly appeared, and gave the British public an excellent idea of Don Hypolito's reasons for rebelling against the Established Government of the Republic. Tim's articles were brutally plain and untempered by style.

The night was warm and cloudless. Westward the faint after-glow of the sunset; and in the east, the slender crescent of the moon, low down on the horizon. Overhead the constellations large and mellow burned like lamps in the purple sky, and mirrored their flashing points in the deep, so that the yacht cut her way through a glittering sea of planetary splendours. The sails were all furled, and a light breeze made humming noises in the taut hemp of the rigging. From the wide mouth of the funnel floated a faint trail of smoke, and the steady screw, with monotonous repetition, throbbed like a beating heart. The water hissing like serpents, streamed past the black sides of the boat, and at the prow the white foam boiled like a witch's cauldron, as she rose and fell on the heaving plain. It was all wonderfully charming, and the

voyagers seated on deck felt it to be so. After a time conversation ceased, and they remained silent, drinking in the beauty of the night and the infinite magic of the sea. Peter, unromantic Peter, was the first to break the charm with a commonplace remark.

“I hope we shall get fresh milk in Cuba; I’m tired of this Swiss stuff.”

“The heathen!” cried Tim, in a disgusted tone; “he thinks of nothing but his fat little paunch. Can’t you admire the works of Nature, you little dunderhead.”

“Well, I *do* want fresh milk,” urged Peter, obstinately.

“You have no eye for beauty, Peter,” said Jack, gravely; “look at the grandeur of the scene around you.”

“It’s very pretty.”

“Pretty!” cried Philip, laughing. “I once heard a young lady call the Hallelujah Chorus pretty. You must be a relation of that young lady, Peter.”

“Of all the adjectives in the English language,” said Duval, with mock solemnity, “the one I most detest is ‘pretty.’ ”

“Especially when it is applied to a certain damsel, whereof we wot,” interjected Philip, mischievously; whereat Jack blushed and the others laughed.

“If Peter is so enthusiastic over all this,” said Tim, waving his hand to indicate the same, “what will he say when he sees Doña Serafina.”

“Bother Doña Serafina,” retorted the doctor, growing red. “I wish you fellows would stop roasting me on the subject.”

“She isn’t a subject, Peter, but an object. Forty-five, and as plain as Tim there!”

“Is it me you mean, Jack. Why, I’m not bad looking, at all. I’ve had that same on the best female authority. We can’t all be heathen gods, like you and Philip.”

“I object to be compared to a heathen god,” said the baronet, lighting a fresh cigarette. “There is ugly Vulcan as well as beautiful Apollo. Your compliment reads both ways, Tim.”

“Oh, the vanity of the creature. But I’m not going to pass compliments, sir. No, it’s my intention to request Mister Duval to deliver a speech.”

“What about?” asked Jack, considerably taken aback at this cool request.

“On the politics of Cholocaca. I dursn’t neglect my business, lads, and the first letter I have to send to my chief is a report of the cause of this shindy.”

“The information will be useful to us all,” said Philip, settling himself more comfortably in his chair; “we will then know which side to take, Don Miguel’s or Don Hypolito’s. Go on, Jack, and you, Peter, hold your tongue; interrupt, and I’ll give orders for your removal overboard.”

The doctor grinned and expressed his desire to know all that Jack had to say on the subject; whereat Duval, without wasting any time, plunged at once into the middle of the subject.

"It's a difficult task," he said, rubbing his chin in some perplexity; "but first you must know the geography of Cholocaca. It has more depth than breadth, being a strip of country lying south of Yucatan, about four hundred miles long and two hundred broad. Tlatonac, the chief town, is in the south, and Acauhtzin, the second city, in the north, about three hundred miles intervening. There are other towns of more or less importance in the interior; but the most of Cholocaca consists of dense forests inhabited by Indians and dotted with buried cities."

"One of which contains the Temple of the Harlequin Opal, I suppose," said Philip, leisurely.

"Yes; I have an idea that the Temple of the Opal is not very far from Tlatonac; but of this I am not sure. Well, to proceed. The country is very mountainous, and there are comparatively few roads. I am engaged by the Government to construct a railway to Acauhtzin."

"How far have you constructed?"

"Fifty miles, or thereabouts, and now that this war is on the tapis, I expect the works will have to be abandoned. Failing this railway, the only way to get to the second capital is by water. So, you see, communication between the two towns is not so perfect as it might be."

"And thus offers good opportunities to Don Hypolito to make things nasty for the Government."

"There's no doubt of that, provided Don Hypolito can secure the allegiance of the navy."

"The navy!" said Peter, in surprise. "You don't mean to say, Jack, that Cholocaca has a navy?"

"A very good one, as South American navies go. They have three war-ships, named respectively, *The Columbus*, *The Cortes*, and *The Pizarro*, all first-class vessels. The Government has also sent to England for two torpedo-boats, which are expected out shortly."

"Then, if Don Hypolito commands the navy, he can do what he likes."

"Not exactly. Tlatonac is well fortified, and the war-ships would have to keep well out of the range of the guns."

"Any army worth mentioning?"

"Yes; a capital army for this part of the world. Mostly Mestizos, you know; and, if needs be, I dare say the Government can secure the forest Indians as their allies. Fools if they do. No wise man trusts an Indian. That holds good of governments also, I take it."

"Judging from your opal story," said Philip, reflectively, "it seems to me that this Indian business depends on the stone."

"No doubt. If Don Hypolito secures Dolores and her opal, the Indians, out of sheer superstition, will side with him against the Government. In that case, they are too near Tlatonac to be pleasant."

"And what are the plans of this Don, if you please," asked Tim, who was scribbling shorthand notes in his pocket-book.

“Hum! you’ll have to ask Xuarez about those, and then he won’t tell you. So far as I can judge, he will win over the navy to his side, establish his head-quarters at Acauhtzin, and make things unpleasant all round. With the navy of three, he can blockade Tlatonac.”

“What about the torpedo-boats?”

“They, no doubt, are on their way out from England. If the war-ships can stop them, they certainly will.”

“Torpedo-boats are unpleasant things to handle.”

“Yes; I don’t suppose the war-ships will try force. Those in charge of the two torpedo-boats won’t know of the disaffection of the navy; so possibly their commander will be decoyed on board the ships, and the rebels can place their own men in charge of the torpederas.”

“In that case,” said Philip, after a pause, “it would be as well to use this yacht to warn them before they enter the harbour.”

“My dear Philip, if you tried on that game, the rebels would send a war-ship after you, and *The Bohemian* would be knocked to bits.”

“Not if she gets a start. I’ll back her speed against the whole Cholocacan navy. When *The Bohemian* has all her furnaces going, she is like a streak of greased lightning.”

“But, after all,” said Peter, yawning, “I don’t see why we need anticipate evil. Don Hypolito may *not* have rebelled, and the navy may still be loyal to the Government.”

“What!” cried Tim, sticking his chin in the air, “d’ye think I’ve come all these miles to see a flash in the pan. If Don Hypolito doesn’t revolt, I shall consider myself deceived. I want war—blood red war, and plenty of it.”

“Barbaric wretch!” said Philip, indolently. “War wasn’t invented to fill the empty columns of your paper during the silly season. Not that I would mind a war myself.”

“You’ll see all that and more,” remarked Jack, confidently. “Xuarez is bent on becoming Dictator of the Republic, and as President Gomez won’t care about being kicked out, it will be a case of war to the knife.”

“What kind of a man is Xuarez?”

“He’s like Napoleon: a wonderful man, I can tell you. You can see from his face that he was born to command. If he gains the day, he won’t be content with playing at Dictator. Not he! He’ll make himself Emperor, establish his capital in the neck of the Isthmus of Panama, and conquer South America. He won’t attempt the north further than Mexico, in case the U.S. Government might make it hot for him. The Yankees object to foreign domination. Some people are so particular.”

“The New World is not the place for empires,” said Philip, decisively. “Monarchs are at a discount in the Americas. Maximilian failed; Iturbide failed; Dom Pedro had to leave Brazil. No; Montezuma was the last of the American emperors—there will never be another.”

“Don’t prophesy till you know, Philip. Don Hypolito is as cunning as the devil, and as clever.”

“I don’t care how clever he is. No one can depend on the half-baked lot that form the population of Spanish America. You have to form a nation before you can construct an empire.”

“There’s some truth in that.”

“Still, if Xuarez appeals to their superstition through this opal,” said Peter, mildly, “there will be—”

“That only counts with the Indians. The Mestizos and the descendants of the Spaniards won’t be led by such child’s play.”

“What about the Church?”

Jack flicked a spot of dust off his coat.

“The Church has that much power in Cholacaca now,” he said slowly, “it’s effete; it’s worn out. The age of the Inquisition is past.”

“If Don Hypolito does get to be Lord-Lieutenant,” asked Tim, inquiringly, “what will he do for the downtrodden country?”

“According to his own showing—everything. Don’t I tell you he wishes to found a monarchy. But when he’s got the upper hand, I question whether he’ll do much, save what chimes in with his own personal ambition. Besides, Cholacaca is going ahead now quite as much as is good for it.”

“That refers to the railway, Jack.”

“Partly, and to other things also. This railway will open up a lot of valuable country. It will run through from end to end. From Janjalla in the south to Acahtzin in the north. Then lines will branch off here and there to the sea-coast on one side, to the mountains on the other. Thus the whole country will be a network of railways, bringing the population and towns within trading distance of one another.”

“All of which visions are to be realised by Jack,” said Peter, with mock sarcasm.

“Yes, realised by Jack,” assented the engineer, good-humouredly. “If Don Hypolito gets beaten, and things go on as now, I will have plenty of work.”

“Much virtue in ‘if,’ ” quoted Philip, smiling.

“It is certainly difficult to foresee the end. Still, Gomez has the army.”

“And Don Hypolito has the navy. It’s pretty even, I think.”

“The combat will be decided by us four,” said Tim, conceitedly, “and we’ll fight on the side of Jack’s choosing.”

“Then we will assist the Government. I don’t want to help Xuarez to marry Dolores, and get the Harlequin Opal.”

“It’s my opinion that the war has nothing to do with the Harlequin Opal,” said Peter, decisively. “If the Indians have got it, the Indians will keep it.”

“Unless I’m within stealing distance of it,” replied Jack, promptly. “No; whatever comes and goes, I’m determined to get that opal. It belongs to Dolores.”

“And Dolores belongs to you. You are an unselfish person, Jack.”

Duval laughed good-humouredly at Philip's mild protestation, and began to talk of other things. Tim went down to the saloon to arrange his notes; Peter turned in, and the symposium broke up without further conversation.

This is only a sample of the many talks they had on the subject of Cholocaca. The information supplied by Jack was useful, as it showed his three companions plainly how matters stood. On their arrival at Tlatonac, they were thus well acquainted with the causes of the war, and could follow future developments with great interest. And when this last conversation took place, Tlatonac was not far off.

After leaving Havana, where they only stayed a few hours for a run ashore, the yacht dropped down towards the Bay of Honduras, and drew steadily towards their destination. The nearer they came, the more excited did Jack become at the prospect of seeing Dolores once more. As a rule, the young engineer was a steady, cool-headed fellow; but this love had upset his brain, and he was as love-sick and inconsequent as any raw lad. Amused at this spectacle, Philip did his best to restrain Jack's impatience, and kept the engines at full speed, so that the lover might the sooner arrive within kissing distance of his beloved.

Within the circle of the Indian isles the heat grew almost unbearable. Blue sea, blue sky, and the burning eye of the sun grilling them constantly during the day. When the west flared red with his setting, and the waters heaved in billows of crimson, they were glad to welcome the cool night with serene moon and chilly, gleaming stars. The pitch bubbled sluggishly in the seams of the deck, the brasses burnt like fire when touched by an incautious hand, and the very air was tremulous with the heat. In vain, with linen suits, solar topees, and constant keeping in the shade, they endeavoured to find coolness; the sun found them out, and baked them with his fierce rays till they were half dead with exhaustion. The heat did not brown them as is customary in more temperate climes, but simply squeezed all the life out of their poor bodies, until they waxed so indolent that did they nothing but lie about in shady corners all day, longing for the night. Even Peter abandoned his entomology; so, from such sacrifice, must the intense heat be judged.

Tim was a perfect god-send in those glowing days of heat and thirst. He was skilful at preparing drinks, and concocted beverages which enabled them to hold out during twelve hours of incessant sun glare. Occasionally they passed an island covered with masses of palms, cacti, and aloes, and sometimes a distant ship arose and fell against the line of the horizon; but they were too indolent to trouble about such trifles. It was nothing but eternal sunshine and eternal heat. But all things must come to an end, and so did this voyage.

“To-morrow,” said Philip, thankfully, as he broiled in the shade. “To-morrow we will sight British Honduras. Then Tlatonac won't be far off.”

“Perhaps it will be worse on shore than at sea,” sighed Peter, mopping his bald head with a red-silk pocket-handkerchief. “Why, if—”

“For Heaven's sake, Peter, throw that handkerchief overboard,” cried Jack, irritably; “the very colour makes me hot.”

“But it's silk!”

“I don't care what it is. It's red, and that's enough for me.”

“Don't lose your temper, Jack!” said Tim, soothingly. “Vamos a tomar las once.”

This Spanish phrase, meaning, “Let us go and take the eleven,” was introduced by Jack, and referred to “aguardiente” (brandy), which has eleven letters. It was in constant use, and when the familiar sound struck on their ears, Philip and Peter lifted their heads anxiously. It is but fair to state, however, that in the sense in which the saying was used on board the yacht, it referred to lemon squash, which also has that number of letters.

“I’ll take one, if you prepare it.”

“Carambo!” said Tim, viciously. “I won’t. Brew one for yourself. I’m not a bar tender.”

“Tim’s getting up his Spanish for the ladies,” murmured Philip, lazily.

“If he greets them with carambo, he’ll be slung out of Tlatonac,” retorted Jack, who frequently indulged in American slang.

“Oh, I also know how to make love in Spanish,” said the Irishman, bluntly. “El hombre prevenido nunca fue vencido.”

“Oh, shut up!”

“What does that mean?” asked Peter, who was profoundly ignorant of the Castillian tongue.

“It means, ‘The prepared man is never conquered,’ you ignorant creature. Peter, you’ll have to learn Spanish, if only to flirt with old Serafina.”

Peter deliberately arose from his chair, and walked down to the saloon.

“That’s Peter’s way of remonstrating,” said Jack, smiling. “It’s hot here; we had better follow his example.”

They did, and in a remarkably short space of time were fast asleep. The siesta had also been introduced by Jack with such success that they slept all day and sat up all night, when it was cool. It was the only way they had of making life bearable.

The next morning they were within sight of Tlatonac. A long low line of sand appeared in the distance, topped here and there with a slender palm. As they drew nearer, they saw the frowning walls of the forts rising above the waters, and beyond, on a hill, the red-roofed houses of the city. Above all, the slender towers and high dome of the cathedral.

“Hullo!” said Jack, noting the absence of the war-ships. “No navy! This looks ominous.”

“Do you think war has begun?” asked Peter, turning round in dismay.

“Lord knows! It looks like it.”

“Well, at all events, the war-ships can’t hurt us now,” said Philip; “we are under the guns of the forts.”

From the central part of the forts a long wharf shot into the blue waters. The bay was covered with boats; intensely green vegetation clothed the shores, and the white walls of the forts glistening like silver in the blazing sunlight. And this was Tlatonac.

“A most exposed situation,” said Philip, thinking of the war. “If the war-ships start shelling those red roofs, there won’t be much of them left.”

He addressed Jack; but that young man did not reply. He was thinking of Dolores. Philip turned towards Peter; but the doctor’s mental eye was fixed on clouds of gorgeous butterflies. Tim!

“I’d like to see a naval combat in this bay,” said Tim, gravely, “with war-ships and torpedoes.”

“Three monomaniacs,” said Philip, rising. “War, butterflies, and Dolores. We’d better go ashore now, lads. I’m tired of those three subjects.”

Chapter V

Don Miguel Is Communicative

Why, look you, Señor, thus the matter stands:
When one is in a country dangerous,
And night is round him everywhere—’tis wise
To venture nothing till the morning’s light,
Lest, in the dark, some hidden pitfall lurk.
Thus stands our fortune. Traitors full of guile
Are in our midst—yet, keeping quiet their plans,
Would gull us into false security.
We know not where to strike—for here, and here,
Danger may lurk, and yet we dare not strike.

The house of Don Miguel Maraquando was situated on one side of the Plaza de los Hombres Ilustres, opposite to the Cathedral, and near the Calle Otumba. Like the generality of Mexican mansions, it was built in the Hispano-Moriscan fashion—a style of architecture peculiarly adapted to this equatorial climate. Walls of massive stone, impenetrable to heat, surrounded a patio paved with variegated tiles and brilliant with tropical flowers. From this patio doors opened into the various rooms of the house, while above were ranges of sleeping-chambers fronted by a light iron-railed balcony running round all four sides of the courtyard. The roof—generally called the azotea—was flat, and in many houses is used for family gatherings in the warm nights or during a temperate day. In this case, however, the Maraquando family made use of the patio, where the heat, particularly at noon, was not so great.

It was a charming spot, cool, bright and airy, with plenty of brilliant-blossomed flowers standing round the sides in red, porous jars, and vividly green creepers which twisted round the squat pillars and clambered to the sunlight by the ladder of the balconies. An old Aztec sacrificial stone carved with ugly gods occupied the centre of the court, and here and there appeared misshapen statues of the same grotesque deities. A light awning, gaily striped with red and white, made the patio shady, and beneath this were cane chairs for the accommodation of the lazy, and small tables on which to place refreshments. It was a veritable castle of indolence, grateful to day-dreamers, and, as such, peculiarly acceptable to the Cholacacans, who are the least industrious people on this planet.

Outside, the mansion, with its massive doors and iron rejas, presented a gloomy and forbidding appearance, more like a prison than a dwelling house. On entering the door, however, and passing through the dim zaguan, the internal cheerfulness of the patio was accentuated by the dullness without. Indeed, the sudden emergence into the light was somewhat bewildering, as with blue sky above and flower-decorated patio below, it was some time before the eye became accustomed to the blinding brilliance of the whole. Graceful architecture, hideous idols, the splendour of floral treasures, and silver glitter of the walls, the

patio was a most charming spot, and eminently calculated to make life in this tropical zone remarkably pleasant.

Into this city paradise, created by the hand of man, Jack introduced his friends, and formally presented them to Don Miguel, Jefe Politico of Tlatonac, who, having been informed of their arrival, awaited them in his patio according to the etiquette of the country. He was tall and lean and dry, with a most astonishing resemblance to Don Quixote as delineated by the pencil of Doré. For coolness, he wore a white linen suit, and shaded his austere face with a broad-brimmed sombrero, which latter he removed with infinite grace on the appearance of the Englishman.

“Welcome, gentlemen, to Tlatonac,” he said majestically, in Spanish; “my house and all therein is at your disposal.”

After this hospitable greeting, he insisted that they should seat themselves in order to partake of some light refreshment. They had the greatest difficulty in assuring him that they were not hungry; as, indeed, they had just finished breakfast before leaving the yacht. Ultimately, in order not to offend their courteous host, they accepted some pulque, the national beverage of Mexico, and were sorry for the concession. Jack was used to the drink, and professed to like it; but the others pronounced it beastly. Those who have tried pulque for the first time will heartily endorse this opinion.

“Oh, oh!” spluttered Peter, trying to conceal his distaste from their host; “it’s like bad butter-milk.”

“What would I not give for a glass of whisky! ‘Tis pig-wash, this same.”

“It is certainly not the milk of Paradise,” said Philip, in disgust.

Don Miguel had retired for a moment in search of cigars for the party, so they could express themselves freely to Jack. They took full advantage of the opportunity.

“The Mexicans say the angels in heaven prefer it to wine,” said Jack, who had finished his glass with great gusto. “They have a proverb:

“‘Lo beben, los angeles En vez de vino.’ ”

“I can’t say much for the angels’ taste, then,” retorted Philip, crossly. “Nastier stuff I never drank. Raki is bad enough, but it’s nectar compared with pulque.”

Jack laughed heartily at the wry faces made by his friends, and comforted them after the manner of Job’s acquaintances.

“You’ll have to drink it, however. Don Miguel will be offended if you do not.”

They all promptly poured the liquor into some of the flower-bearing jars which happened, fortunately enough, to be handy.

“There,” said Peter, triumphantly; “he’ll think we have finished it.”

“I’ll bring a pocket-pistol next time,” said Tim, gloomily. “I’ll be having the cholera with this stuff.”

“Hush! here is Don Miguel.”

Their host returned with a good supply of cigars, which proved to be more acceptable than the pulque. Maraquando expressed great surprise that Peter did not smoke.

“What does he say?” asked Peter, woefully ignorant of Spanish.

“That you ought to smoke.”

Peter shook his head in disgust.

“Tell Don Miguel tobacco is slow poison.”

Maraquando laughed when this was translated to him.

“It must be very slow, Señor,” he said, smiling. “I have smoked for forty years, and yet the poison has not overtaken me as yet.”

All laughed at this speech save Peter, who could not appreciate jokes in the tongue of Castille. Indeed, he began to find his ignorance of Spanish somewhat annoying, as his friends, who acted as interpreters, played tricks on him. He became proficient in the tongue when Doña Serafina took him in hand; but that was many weeks later.

All this time Jack was wondering why Dolores did not appear to welcome him back. As it was not etiquette to ask directly for the ladies of the family, he made the inquiry in a roundabout way.

“Your family I trust are well, Señor?”

“They are in excellent health, I thank you, Señor Juan. At present I have but my daughter with me. Doña Serafina and Dolores are staying for a few days at my estancio.”

This was bad news for Jack; but as Don Miguel’s eyes were fixed inquiringly on his face, he was forced to dissemble his sorrow.

“And Don Rafael?”

“Is at present with his ship at Acauhtzin.”

“What! with Don Hypolito?”

The expression on Maraquando’s face changed, and he seemed about to burst out into a furious speech; but, out of courtesy, restrained himself for the present.

“We will talk of this again,” he said, gravely. “I am sure you do not care about our politics.”

“Indeed we do,” replied Jack, emphatically. “This gentleman”—indicating Tim—“is a special correspondent, sent here by a great English paper, to report on your war.”

“Our war!” echoed the Spaniard, with some surprise. “How do you know there is to be a war?”

“The telegrams to Europe say as much!” interposed Tim, speaking in Spanish.

“Telegrams sent by Don Hypolito, I have no doubt,” responded Maraquando, grimly. “There will be no war, gentlemen.”

“*Carambo! Sacré! Damn!*” ejaculated Tim, who swore fluently in all three languages. “I have been tricked, then?”

“Wait a moment, Señor Corresponsal. You will have plenty to write about; I will tell you some astonishing news shortly. Meanwhile, I must present you to my daughter, Doña Eulalia.”

The girl who appeared at this moment caused them all to rise to their feet, and assuredly a more beautiful vision could not be seen anywhere. She was a little sparkling brunette, all eyes and smiles (as Tim afterwards phrased it), and when she beheld Jack, came forward eagerly to greet him with outstretched hands.

“Señor Juan,” she said, in a deliciously sweet voice, “you have returned. Ah, how sorry Dol—Doña Serafina will be that she is not here to greet you.”

She gave a side glance at her father on pronouncing the name of Doña Serafina; and, by that diplomatic substitution, Philip guessed that she was in the secret of the lovers.

“I trust Doña Serafina will return soon, Señora,” said Jack, significantly, after exchanging courtesies. “I am anxious to see Doña Serafina.”

Eulalia put her black fan up to hide the smile on her lips, and intimated that she expected her aunt back on the morrow. Nothing was said of Dolores; but Jack was not so dull a lover as not to know that, in this case, the lesser Serafina included the greater Dolores. Meanwhile, neither Tim nor Philip could keep their eyes off this Spanish beauty, and Don Miguel graciously presented them to his daughter. As for Peter, he was examining an ugly clay god at the other end of the court, which showed that he had no eye for beauty.

“At your feet, lady,” said Philip, in his best Castilian.

“My hands for your kisses, Señor,” she responded, coquettishly, whereat the baronet felt a strange feeling about the region of his heart.

“Oh, Lord, Lord!” he muttered, as Tim was executing court bows to the lady. “Great Heaven! this cannot be love at first sight. It must be the pulque.”

He caught Jack’s eye at this moment, and saw a derisive smile on that young man’s lips, whereat he smiled also, as if to intimate that he thought but little of the dainty beauty. Jack knew better, however. Then Peter was torn away from his Aztec deity, and presented in due form, making use, at the introduction, of all the Spanish of which he was master.

“Bueno! Bueno!” quoth Peter, in perplexity, when Philip came to his rescue.

“Say ‘a los pies de usted,’ Señora,” he whispered quickly.

“I can’t remember all that,” protested the doctor.

“Try.”

“A los pies ud worsted!”

Doña Eulalia put up her fan at the sound of Peter's Spanish; but understanding the drift of his remark, replied gravely enough:

"Bése usted los manos, Señor."

"What's that, Philip?"

"My hands for your kisses, Señor."

"Will I have to kiss them?" asked Peter, in dismay.

"No; it's only a matter of form."

At this assurance, the doctor was much relieved, and not feeling any profound interest in a dialogue carried on completely in a foreign tongue, returned to his examination of the Aztec gods. Maraquando was already deep in conversation with Jack and Tim, so Philip had Doña Eulalia all to himself, and made good use of this solitude of two. He was glad he knew Spanish. 'Tis a pleasant language in which to talk gay nonsense.

On her side, Eulalia had no strong objection to the company of this eccentric American—all foreigners are Americans with the Cholocacans—and though he was a heretic, yet he spoke Spanish beautifully, and had no lack of pretty sayings at his command. Doña Eulalia would have flirted with a lepero in default of anything better; and as Don Felipe was a most desirable young man from every point of view, she lost no time in making herself agreeable. Philip, the cynic, enjoyed it greatly, thereby proving that a considerable portion of his misogamy was humbug. With the hour comes the eternal feminine. This was the hour—Eulalia the woman. It flashed across Philip's mind at that moment that he was playing with fire. Confident in his own imperviousness to fire, he went on playing. Then he burnt himself, and great was his outcry.

"I always understood," said Cassim to his charming companion, "that Cholocacan ladies were shut up like nuns."

"A great many of them are, Señor," replied Eulalia, demurely; "but my father is more liberal in his ideas. He delights in presenting us to his friends."

"How charming—for the friends."

"And how delightful—for us poor women. I assure you, Señor, that I would not care to be shut up at all; neither would my cousin Dolores!"

"I have heard of Doña Dolores from Jack!"

Eulalia flashed a glance at him from her glorious dark eyes, bit the top of her fan, and made an irrelevant observation.

"My cousin admires fair people."

"And Don Juan is fair. Oh, never fear, Señora, I know all."

"All what, Don Filipe?"

"All about fair people!" replied Philip, skilfully, "though, for my part, I prefer dark ladies."

This last remark was too much even for the audacious coquetry of Eulalia, and she, glancing uneasily at her father, turned the conversation with a dexterity begotten by long practice.

“My aunt, Doña Serafina, is dark. She is our duenna, you know. I am sure you will find her very charming.”

“Oh, certainly, Señora, on your recommendation I—”

“And Tlatonac is charming, also,” interposed the lady, smartly. “Do you stay long here, Señor?”

“That depends on—shall we say—Señor Duval.”

His intention was to hint Dolores; but Doña Eulalia evidently thought the acquaintanceship was becoming too intimate, and entrenched herself behind her fan and a smile.

“Rather does it depend on Don Hypolito.”

“Ah! Is there, then, to be a war?”

“I do not know, Señor. My father thinks it likely. If there is, of course you will go?”

“No! Why should I? Tlatonac has many attractions for me.”

“My father will show you all over it to-morrow,” rejoined Eulalia, with a mischievous smile. She knew quite well what he meant, but was not going to betray such knowledge at such an early period of her acquaintance. The proprieties must be observed—even in Cholocaca. Mrs. Grundy is not indigenous to Britain only. She flourished at Tlatonac under the name of Doña Serafina.

“You came in a steamer, did you not, Señor?”

“Yes; in my yacht, *The Bohemian*.”

“Your vessel, Señor?”

“Yes.”

Eulalia opened her eyes. This Americano must be very rich to own the boat she had seen steaming into the harbour. But, then, all Americanos were rich; though not all so nice as this one.

“You must do me the honour of coming on board, Señora,” said Philip, eagerly. Then, seeing her draw back in alarm at this audacious proposal, “Of course, with Don Miguel and Doña Serafina. Likewise your cousin. My friend Don Juan is anxious to see Doña Dolores.”

“Hush, Señor!” said Eulalia, quickly, glancing towards her father; “it is a secret. Do not speak of it now; but let us talk to the Señor yonder with the spectacles.”

“He cannot talk Spanish.”

“Oh yes, he can, Señor, I heard him.”

She burst out into a merry laugh, and went towards Peter, followed by the reluctant Cassim. Philip was getting on excellently well, and rather resented the introduction of a third person into the conversation, even though it was but harmless Peter. That gentleman would much rather have been left alone to potter about the patio by himself; but Doña Eulalia, who saw his embarrassment, wickedly made him attempt Spanish, much to his discomfiture. Philip translated his compliments to Eulalia, whereon she smiled so graciously on the little man that the baronet grew restless, and Peter began to think there were other things in the world besides butterflies.

Meanwhile Don Miguel was having an interesting conversation with Tim and Jack concerning the state of affairs prevalent at Tlatonac. He was much flattered at the idea that a “gran’-diario” of England should take such an interest in Central American politics, and paid Tim, as the Señor Corresponsal, such attention, that Jack began to wish he were in the Irishman’s shoes. He would then have a better chance of Dolores. As for Tim he discoursed blandly, quite unaware of the honours being showered on him, and when his Spanish failed, took refuge in French; when that gave out, he supplied his wants with Italian, so that his conversation savoured of the Tower of Babel and the confusion of tongues. However, with Jack’s assistance, he managed to get along capitally, and gained a good deal of useful information from the Jefe Politico. Don Miguel himself was most eloquent on the subject, and particularly rabid against Xuarez, whom he seemed to hate as only a Spaniard can hate. Dr. Johnson liked a good hater. He should have met Don Miguel.

“Don Hypolito is a dangerous man, gentlemen,” he said, with cold malignity; “he wishes to become President of the Republic.”

“And why should he not become President?” asked Tim, calmly.

“Because he would use his position to destroy the Constitution of Cholocaca. We have not forgotten Iturbide and Dr. Francia. Cholocaca shall never lie at the mercy of a tyrant, as did Mexico and Paraguay. No, gentlemen. It was not for such an end that we threw off the yoke of Spain. Republicans we are, Republicans we remain. If Don Hypolito succeeds, he will find Tlatonac in ruins.”

“I don’t think that will stop him, Señor,” said Jack, lightly. “If he ruins the old Tlatonac, he can build up a new one.”

“Not with peons and Indians,” retorted Maraquando, fiercely. “We, Señor, are Spaniards, and will submit to the tyranny of no man, much less this Mestizo of a Xuarez.”

“What do you propose to do, Don Miguel?”

“The Junta has already decided that. Don Hypolito is to be arrested, brought here for trial, and banished from the country.”

“I don’t see how you are going to capture him at Acauhtzin. It is the headquarters of his party.”

Maraquando smiled grimly, and waved his hand contemptuously.

“Xuarez has no party. A few unimportant estancieros believe in him, certainly; but the whole population of Tlatonac is in favour of the Government.”

“But not the whole population of Cholocaca,” said Duval, significantly.

“That is no matter. The Government hold Tlatonac, and, therefore, has all the power in its own hands. Acauhtzin! a mere village, whose adherence can do Xuarez no good.”

“But if it comes to war?”

“It will not come to war, Señor Corresponsal. The fleet have gone to Acauhtzin to arrest Xuarez, and bring him here for trial.”

“They won’t do that easily.”

Don Miguel laughed in a saturnine sort of manner, and pulled his moustache savagely.

“And why not, Señor?” said he slowly. “I think three war-ships, manned by brave men, are more than sufficient to arrest one traitor.”

“That’s so,” replied Jack, dropping into Americanese, “if you can trust their crews.”

“My son, Don Rafael, commands *The Pizarro*,” he said, gravely. “The Government can trust him and his crew, if no others.”

“‘One swallow doesn’t make a summer,’ Don Miguel. That’s an English proverb.”

“And a very true one. Where did you hear that our navy was not to be trusted, Don Juan?”

“Here, and yonder!” said Jack, waving his hand all round the compass. “I hear this and that, Señor, and think over things. The general opinion, I find, is that there will be a civil war.”

“It needs no prophet to tell that. And afterwards?”

“Señor, it is said the army will support the Junta, but the navy will strike for Xuarez.”

“If I thought so!” growled Maraquando, savagely, under his breath. “If I—but no, Señor, you are mistaken. My son, Don Rafael, is in the navy, and many of the officers are his personal friends. He only consorts with men of honour, Señor. I swear that there is no fear of the navy revolting. In a few days, our three ships will come back with Don Hypolito.”

Jack shrugged his shoulders. He was a youth of few words, and saw no reason to waste breath on such obstinacy. All the same, he held to his opinion. Don Rafael or no Don Rafael, the three war-ships and their crews were not to be trusted. In spite of his refusal to believe in such treachery, it seemed as though Don Miguel also had his doubts on the subject.

“I will see the President about this you speak of, Señor. It is as well that all things should be guarded against.”

“There is one other thing that should be guarded against,” said Jack, gravely. “Doña Serafina and your niece are some distance from the city, at your estancia. As there may be a war, the country will not be safe. I suggest that you, Señor, should ride out and escort them back.”

“I am afraid I cannot leave the city at this juncture.”

“Then let me go, Señor,” said Jack, eagerly. “In any event, I will have to see the railway works; they are near your estancia, you know. Let me ride over to-morrow, and I will bring them back with me.”

“It is too much honour, Señor,” replied Maraquando politely. “Still, if you can spare the time—”

“Oh, that will be all right, Señor. It is settled, then, I will go to-morrow.”

“I am your debtor, Don Juan, and accept the offer with a thousand thanks. But your friends—”

“Oh, we will look round Tlatonac,” said Tim, putting up his pocket-book, wherein he had been making notes; “and if you will but introduce me to the President, Señor Maraquando, I shall take it as a favour. It will be useful to me in my letters to Europe.”

“I am at your service, Señor Corresponsal. His Excellency will have much pleasure in receiving you, I am sure. Bueno!”

“That settles you, Tim,” said Duval, in English “Philip can go with you, unless he prefers to remain with Doña Eulalia. But Peter?”

“Oh, send him after butterflies!”

Duval thought this a good idea, and, turning to Don Miguel, explained how anxious Peter was in pursuit of insects. Could Don Miguel send him beyond the city in charge of some one, to hunt for beetles? Maraquando reflected for a moment, and thought that he could do so. There was an Indian named Cocom, who would attend to Don Pedro. Unfortunately, he spoke no English.

“Never mind,” said Jack, easily, “when my friend is hunting the wily butterfly, he speaks to no one. All I desire is that he should have a guide, so that he be not lost.”

“Bueno! I will see that Cocom goes with Don Pedro to-morrow.”

Jack called Peter from his interesting conversation with Eulalia, and explained matters. The doctor was quite agreeable, and wanted to go at once to the yacht, in order to get his paraphernalia ashore. This ardent desire, however, was not gratified at the moment, as they could scarcely take leave of their courteous host in so cavalier a fashion.

“By the way, Jack,” said Philip, at this moment, “are we to stay on board the yacht during our stay here?”

“By no means. We will go to my house.”

“What! are you a landed proprietor, Jack?”

“I have a rough kind of diggings, but it’s big enough for the lot of us. Don Miguel,” he added, turning to their host, “I must now take my leave, with my friends, as we want to see about our house.”

“My house is at the disposal of your friends, Señor.”

“A thousand thanks. I kiss your hands, Señor Miguel; but for the present we will stay at my residence in the Calle Huascar.”

It not being etiquette to press the invitation, Don Miguel gravely bowed, and wished them good-bye for the present. He had to go to a meeting of the Junta in order to confer about the fleet which had remained away from Tlatonac a long time.

“And it will remain a longer time,” said Jack, as they emerged on to the street. “The navy is going to revolt to Don Hypolito.”

"I believe that's true, but the old chap doesn't think so. He'll have his eyes open soon, or my name's not Tim. Where's Philip?"

"Saying good-bye to Doña Eulalia," replied Jack, smiling. "Ah, by the way, here he is! Well, Sir Philip Cassim, Baronet, I see you are stabbed by a wench's black eye!"

"A little harmless conversation," protested Philip, guiltily; "don't make a mountain out of a mole-hill, Jack. I can take care of my heart; but your charming brunette friend has fascinated Peter."

"I don't see how that can be," said the doctor, dryly, "seeing I couldn't understand a word she was saying."

"The language of the eye, Peter. You must learn that. It is more interesting than butterflies."

"So you seem to think."

"Jack," said Tim, suddenly, "before we go to your cabin, take us to the telegraph-office, if there is one here."

"Of course there is one here. You want to wire to your editor?"

"Not yet! I want to arrange matters with the officials. There's going to be trouble here in a week, anyhow."

"So soon as that?" said Philip, starting. He had not heard the conversation with Don Miguel.

"Aye, and sooner," replied Duval, prophetically. "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, Philip; for, as sure as I stand here, news is now on its way to Tlatonac of the loss of the navy."

"In that case," said the baronet, quietly, "it was a good thing I brought all those arms with me. You'll have to learn how to shoot, Peter."

"Butterflies and beetles," said Peter, absently. He was thinking of the morrow's sport.

Chapter VI

Chalchuih Tlatonac

This is a country of magic; for, lo! in the heat of the noontide,
Silent and lone is the city, no footfall is heard in the highways,
Only the grasshopper shrilling, the tinkle of water clear gushing,
And rarely the sigh of the breezes, that stir the white dust on the pavements.
Magic! no magic but custom; for this is the time of siesta;
When sinks the sun, then the city will waken to love and to laughter;
Lightly the gay señoritas will dance in the cold-shining moonbeams,
Flirt fan, flash eyes, and beckon, to lovers who long for their kisses,
Then will the castanets rattle, the little feet dance the bolero,
And serenades sigh at the windows, in scorning of jealous duennas.
Magic is not of the noonday; when glimmers the amorous twilight,
Then is the time of enchantment, of love, and of passionate lovers.

Cocom was completely ignorant of his real age. He might have been a hundred, and he certainly looked as though he had completed his century. Long ago he had left off counting the flying years and meditating on the mutability of human life. In fact, he had changed so little that it is doubtful whether he believed in mutability at all. Wrinkled he was, it is true, and slightly bent, but his black eyes twinkled with the fire of youth, and he enjoyed his meals. These things argue juvenility, and, as Cocom possessed them, he evidently knew the secret of immortality. Perhaps he had found that fountain of youth spoken of by Ponce de Leon. If so, it had affected his soul not his body. He looked like Methuselah.

Yet he was wonderfully active considering his years, and undertook to introduce Peter to the butterflies of Central America. Arrayed in his white cotton drawers and shirt, with his pink zarape gracefully draped over his bent shoulders, he smoked a long black cigar, and waited the orders of the “Americanos” in stolid silence.

Peter was affectionately handling his butterfly-net, Tim was finishing his breakfast, and Jack, in a smart riding-dress, was slashing his high boots with his whip, impatient to get away. They were looking at Cocom, who had just arrived, and waiting for Philip, who, as usual, was late for breakfast.

“He looks too old to be of much use,” said the doctor, disconsolately; “why couldn’t Don Miguel send me a man instead of a mummy?”

“Perhaps the mummy is well up in entomology!”

“He ought to be that same!” cried Tim, with his mouth full; “he’s had plenty of time to learn, anyhow. Ask the old cocoanut his age, Jack.”

“Don’t you take liberties with his name, Tim. Cocom was a king of Mayapan; and this, I presume, is his descendant.”

“Royalty out at elbows!” said Peter, blandly.

“It’s a king, is it?” remarked Tim, staring at the Indian. “He looks a mighty second-hand sort of article. I should be a king myself. Wasn’t one of my ancestors King of Cork?”

“Good morning, gentlemen,” said Philip, entering at this moment; “where did you pick up Methuselah?”

“This is Cocom, my guide,” said the doctor, proudly introducing Cocom, who removed his sombrero with a graceful sweep.

“Oh, you are going to hunt the ferocious beetle, are you not? What is he, Jack? An Aztec?”

“No; a descendant of the Mayas.”

“A dethroned king—no less.”

“You know the country round here, Cocom?” said Philip, taking no notice of Tim’s joke.

“Yes, Señor Americano; all! all!” replied Cocom, with grave dignity. “Don Pedro will be safe with me.”

“You can show him butterflies?”

“Señor, I can show him butterflies, ants, beetles, wasps; all the Señor desires to behold.”

"That being so, Peter, you had better get away," said Jack, impatiently. "I want to be off, and must see you started first; you can't be trusted to run the show on your own account."

"I'm quite ready. Good-bye, boys; I will see you this afternoon."

"Not me," said Duval, brusquely; "I'm off to Maraquando's estancia."

"Take care of the sun, Peter," warned Philip, kindly; "your head isn't over strong."

Peter indignantly repudiated this imputation on his cranium, and forthwith followed Cocom out of the house, gleefully looking forward to a pleasant day. His ideas of pleasure were singularly limited.

"He's quite safe, isn't he, Jack?" said Philip anxiously. "I don't want Peter to get into trouble."

"Oh, Cocom will look after him. I know the old man well. He is devoted to Don Miguel, who once saved his life. Cocom will sit on a bank and watch Peter gasping after butterflies. The exercise will do the doctor's liver good."

"You are off yourself now, I suppose?"

"Yes, I've been waiting for you. Really, Philip, you are the laziest man I know."

"This house that Jack built is the castle of indolence," explained Philip, sitting down to table. "Go, my friend, and kiss Dolores for me!"

"I'll do nothing of the sort. I'll kiss her for my own sake! Adios caballeros."

"When will you return, Jack?"

"To-morrow! Meanwhile Don Miguel will look after you both. Take care of yourselves."

"Con dios va usted mi amigo!" said Cassim, graciously. "Now go away, and let me eat my breakfast."

Jack departed, and Tim went to the window to see him ride down the street.

"He is a fine boy," he said, returning to the breakfast-table. "Doña Dolores ought to be proud of having such a lover."

"I have no doubt she is, Tim. It is to be hoped the course of true love will run smooth with Jack; but what with Don Hypolito and the harlequin opal I have my doubts. What are your plans, Timothy?"

"It's writing I'll be, all day!"

"Nonsense. Come and see Tlatonac."

"I can't. Isn't my chief waiting a letter from me?"

"Such industry! Tim, you make me feel ashamed of myself."

"The devil I do. Then you write my letter, Philip and I'll flirt with Doña Eulalia. I'm a white-headed boy with the female sex."

“No, thank you. It’s not a fair exchange.”

“Ah, she’s a dark-eyed colleen, Philip. You have lost your heart there.”

“No,” said Philip, a trifle doubtfully. “I have seen too many pretty faces to be captured at first sight by a new one. I have other things to think of besides marriage.”

“You have, but you won’t,” retorted Tim, ungrammatically. “Now get away with you, and leave me to my writing.”

“I’ll be back in two hours.”

“If you are not, I’ll come and look you up at the Don’s. Make love to Doña Eulalia while you can, Philip, for it’s mighty little time you’ll have when the row starts.

“Do ye hear the cannon’s rattle? do ye smell the smoke av battle,
Whin the Irish bhoys are ridin’ down the inimy so bould?
Do ye see the bullets flyin’? and your faithful Patrick dyin’,
Wid ne’er a sowl beside him dear, to kiss his forehead cowl?”

Tim, with that sudden transition from mirth to melancholy so characteristic of the Celtic race, threw so much pathos into the last two lines that Philip could not trust himself to reply, and went hastily out of the room. He drew a long breath of relief when he found himself in the hot sunshine, for that unexpected note of sorrow from jovial Tim touched him more nearly than he cared to confess. In spite of his cold demeanour and reserve, Philip was of a very emotional nature, and that melancholy strain had reached his heart. He was by no means prone to superstition, but at that moment a sudden question stirred his self-complacency. Never before had he heard Tim sing so pathetically, and the unexpectedness of the thing startled him. It seemed to hint at future sorrows. Poor Tim!

“Confound that Banshee song,” he said, with a shiver, as he strolled along towards the Calle Otumba; “it makes me think of death and the grave. These Irishmen take one at a disadvantage. I won’t shake off the feeling the whole day.”

He forgot all about it, however, when he reached Maraquando’s house, for in the patio he found Eulalia, who greeted him with a brilliant smile. The charm of her society banished the melancholy engendered by Tim’s pessimism, and, chatting gaily to this strongly vitalised being, who restlessly flashed round the court like a humming-bird, he recovered his usual spirits. There is more in juxtaposition than people think.

“And where are your friends, Don Felipe?” asked Eulalia, standing on tip-toe to pluck a gorgeous tropical blossom.

“Allow me to get you that flower, Señora,” replied Philip, eagerly. “My friends,” he added, as he presented her with the bud, “are variously employed. Don Pedro is out after butterflies with Cocom. Señor Corresponsal is writing for his ‘diario,’ and Don Juan—”

“I know where Don Juan is, Señor. Yes; my father told me of his kindness. He will bring back from the estancia Doña Serafina.”

“And Doña Dolores?”

Eulalia flung open her fan with a coquettish gesture, and raising it to her face, looked over the top of it at Philip.

“You know, then, Señor, what you know.”

“Assuredly,” replied the baronet, tickled at this delicate way of putting it. “I know that my friend wishes to marry your cousin.”

“Ay de mi. It can never be.”

“He is not rich enough.”

“He is not a Spaniard. My father will never consent. And then,” she dropped her voice, and looked round fearfully. “The Chalchuih Tlatonac!”

“I know about that also. But it has nothing to do with this marriage.”

“It has everything to do with it. The Indians look on my cousin as one of themselves, and, if she married an Americano, she would leave the country. Then there would be no guardian of the stone, and their god would be angry.”

“Is your cousin, then, to marry as they please?”

“She must marry one of her own people. An Indian or a Mestizo.”

“But suppose she does not?”

“The Indians will carry her to their forest temple, and keep her there in captivity.”

“Impossible! How could they seize her in Tlatonac?”

Doña Eulalia nodded her head wisely.

“You do not know how strong are the Indians, Señor. They are everywhere. If they want Dolores at their temple, they will be sure to capture her if they choose.”

“By force?”

“No, by stratagem! They could take her away at any moment, and none of us would see her again.”

“But what does Don Hypolito say to all this?”

Eulalia spread out her little hands with a look of disgust.

“Don Hypolito wants to marry Dolores because of the Chalchuih Tlatonac! He is a Mestizo; so the Indians would not mind such a marriage. But she hates him, and loves Don Juan. Let your friend beware, Señor.”

“Of whom! Of Don Hypolito?”

“Yes; and of the Indians. It is much feared that Don Hypolito is no good Catholic—that he has been to the forest temple and seen—oh,” she broke off with a shudder. “I do not know what he has seen. But he hates Don Juan, and, if he captures him, will put him to death. Señor—”

At this moment, before she could say more, Don Miguel entered the patio. Whereupon Eulalia whirled away like a black-and-amber bird. Philip looked after her for a second, thinking how graceful she was, then turned to greet Don Miguel. That gentleman was as lean and dry and as solemn as ever. How he ever came to be the parent of this fairy of midnight, Philip could not quite understand. But doubtless she took after her mother—the female side of a family generally does, in looks.

“I was just conversing with Doña Eulalia,” said Philip, responding to Maraquando’s stately greeting “Your daughter, Señor.”

“She is yours also, Señor,” was Miguel’s startling reply.

“Egad! I wish she was mine,” thought Cassim, who knew this Spanish formula too well to be astonished. “By the way, Señor, my friend Don Pedro thanks you for sending Cocom,” he added politely.

“Don Pedro is welcome a thousand times to my poor services. And where is the Señor Correspoñsal?”

“Writing for his diario.”

“Bueno, Señor. And Don Juan?”

“He is now on his way to your estancia.”

“I am his servant, for such kindness,” said Maraquando, gravely. “Will you take some pulque, Señor Felipe?”

“I thank you, no,” replied Philip, remembering his former experience of the drink. “If not troubling you too much, I would like to see Tlatonac.”

“I am at your service, Señor. Shall we depart at once?”

Philip signified his acquiescence, though he would rather have stayed in the cool patio, and flirted with Doña Eulalia. He knew, however, that Spanish fathers are not the most amiable parents in the world, and resent too much attention being paid by foreigners to their womankind; therefore he took leave of the young lady and departed with Don Miguel. Before Philip parted from that gentleman, he had explored the city thoroughly, and was quite worn out.

The Jefe Politico was a most conscientious cicerone. He took Philip to every building of any note, and gave him a minute history of all events connected therewith, from the earliest period to the present time. Fortunately, Tlatonac was not very old, or he would have gone on for a week without stopping. As it was, he took nearly all day in directing Philip’s attention to dates, Aztec idols, ruins of teocallis, sites of palaces, to battle-fields, and many other things too numerous to mention. This information was accurate but wearisome, and Philip felt it to be so. Maraquando was Prescott and Bancroft rolled into one, as regards knowledge of history, and, having found a willing listener, took full advantage of the opportunity. Cassim was too polite to object, but he heartily wished that Don Miguel would hold his tongue. The most pathetic part of the whole affair was that the poor man thought he was amusing his guest.

Tlatonac is built partly on the seashore and partly on a hill. Within the walls of the forts frowning over the waters are the dwellings of the flat portion inhabited by peons and leperos, with a sprinkling of low-caste mestizos. From thence the houses rise up to the top of the hill, which is crowned by the cathedral in the Plaza de los Hombres Ilustres. This is the heart of Tlatonac, the aristocratic quarter, and commands a splendid view of the surrounding country.

The Plaza was a very large square, fenced in on three sides by the houses of the Cholacacan aristocracy, on the fourth by the great cathedral. In the centre was the zocalo, a green oasis of verdure laid out in winding walks and brilliant flower-beds. Herein the aristocracy took their walks when the band played in the cool of the evening, using it as a kind of alameda, wherein to meet their friends and gossip. It was indeed a charming spot, and its green arcades afforded a grateful shade from the hot sun which blazed down on the white stones of the square outside. On leaving the zocalo, they entered the church dedicated to Nuestra Señora de la Concepcion, which once gave its name to the town now more generally known by its Indian appellation of Tlatonac.

“The cathedral, Señor,” said Don Miguel, as they stood beneath the glory of the great cupola, “is built on the site of a famous teocalli.”

“That dedicated to the Chalchuih Tlatonac?”

“To the false god Huitzilopochtli, Señor,” corrected the Spaniard, gravely. “I see you know the story. Yes, it was here that the son of Montezuma’s daughter came with the shining precious stone which gives its name to the city. He worshipped his barbaric deities after the fashion of his mother, and built here a teocalli to the war-god, wherein was preserved the devil stone. Many years after, when the Conquistadores—our ancestors, Señor—arrived, the then possessor of the opal fled with it into the impenetrable forests, and thus the jewel was lost to the Crown of Spain. The Conquistadores pulled down the teocalli and built thereon this church to the glory of Our Lady, at the command of Fray Medina, who afterwards became the first Bishop of Tlatonac. Is it not beautiful, Señor? and all for the glory of God and the true cross.”

It was indeed a beautiful old church, mellowed into restful beauty by the lapse of years. The floor was of marquetry, hued like a dim rainbow owing to the different coloured woods. Slender porphyry pillars sprang from the floor to the groined ceiling in two long rows, and at the far end, under a firmament of sun and stars and silver moons, with ascending saints and wide-winged angels, arose the glory of the great altar, sparkling in the dusky atmosphere like a vast jewel. Before it burned a silver lamp like a red star. Tapestries, richly worked, depended between the pillars, gorgeous brocades were here, faded silken draperies there, and everywhere faces of saint, angel, cherubim, and seraphim. Gilt crosses, pictures of the Virgin, statues of the Virgin, side altars laden with flowers, silver railings, steps of Puebla marble, like alabaster, and throughout a dim religious light as the rays of the sun pierced the painted windows. The fumes of incense permeated the building; there was a sound of muttered prayers, and here and there a dark figure prostrate before a shrine or kneeling at the confessional.

All this magnificence was toned down by time to delicate hues, which blended the one with the other and made a harmonious whole. Dingy and old as it was, the whole edifice was redolent of sacred associations, and it required some imagination to conceive that where now reigned this quiet and holy beauty once arose a heathen temple, where the victims shrieked on the altar of a fierce deity. Religion did not seem very flourishing in Cholacaca, for on this day in the cathedral there were few worshippers—no priests.

“We have few priests now, Señor,” explained Don Miguel, gravely, as they left the great building. “The Jesuits were once powerful in Cholacaca, but they were expelled some years ago. The priests *would* meddle with politics, and when the Church clashes with the Government, well, Señor—one must go to the wall.”

“So the Jesuits went?”

“Yes. They were unwilling to go, for Cholacaca is one of the richest mission fields. Not that I think they have done much good, for though the Indians are outwardly converted, yet I know for certain that they still secretly worship Huitzilopochtli and the Chalchuih Tlatonac.”

“What makes you think so, Don Miguel?”

“Little things! The straws which show the wind’s course. On the summit of some of these ruined teocallis beyond the walls, I have often seen fresh wreaths of flowers. Nay, in my own patio, before those statues of Coatlicue, Quetzalcoatl, and Teoyamiqui, I have found offerings of flowers and fruit. ‘Tis also said, Señor,” pursued Maraquando, dropping his voice, “that in the hidden Temple of the Opal the Indians still sacrifice human victims to the war-god. But this may be false.”

“Very probably! I cannot conceive such horrors,” replied Philip, with a shudder; “but, as regards priests, there are still some here, I presume?”

“Assuredly; but not of the Society of Jesus—save one. Yes, Padre Ignatius is still here. He was, and is, so beloved by all that the President had not the heart to banish him. So he yet works for the Faith in our midst.”

“I should like to meet Father Ignatius?”

“You shall do so, Señor. He is a great friend of mine, and the confessor of my children. Often does he come to my poor house. But let us walk on, Señor. There are many things to see. El Palacio Nacional, where dwells his excellency; the Market Place, and the alameda. We are proud of our alameda, Señor.”

Thus talked on Don Miguel, and, amused by the novelty of the scene, Philip stared round him with great pleasure. They passed the pulquerias, which are the public-houses of Tlatonac, saw the Palacio Nacional, a huge stone building, above which flaunted the yellow flag of the Republic, with its device of a white stone, darting rays of red, yellow, green, and blue, in allusion to the opal, explored the prison, which held a fine collection of ruffians, and ultimately arrived at the Market Place.

It was the prettiest sight in Tlatonac, and Philip was sorry he had not the power to transfer the scene with all its varied hues and picturesque figures to paper. A square, little less large than the great Plaza, surrounded on all sides by gaily tinted houses. Reds, greens, yellows, pinks, the Plaza was girdled by a perfect rainbow, and under the gay awnings before these sat the dealers and their wares. Here were tropical fruits from the tierras calientes, comprising oranges, bananas, pineapples, melons, peaches, and an infinite variety of others, all piled in picturesque confusion on the stalls. As to flowers, the whole place was a mass of blossom, from gorgeous red cactus buds to modest bunches of violets. Owing to the geography of Mexico and Central America, the products of both temperate and tropical zones can be found flourishing at one and the same time. Hence the violets, which Philip had scarcely expected to see. They put him in mind of English woods—of the day when in the Isle of Wight, Jack told him about Dolores.

“Yes, the Indians are fond of flowers,” said Don Miguel, when Philip expressed his surprise at the profusion of blossoms. “It is a taste they inherit from their ancestors. The Aztecs, you know, were famous for floriculture. We love flowers just as passionately; and, go where you will in Tlatonac, you will find blooming gardens gay with flowers.”

“It is a graceful taste, and one which the climate enables you to gratify to the full.”

“Without doubt, Señor. We possess three climates in which flourish different products of Nature. Tlatonac is in the tierra calienti, or hot country. Higher up, on the table-lands it is less tropical, and is called the tierra templada, while the snow-clad mountain peaks, where flourish pine trees, oaks, and hemlocks, is known by the name of the tierra fria. Thus, you see, in our country we possess all the climates of the world.”

“A rare advantage. Central America is a favoured country.”

“In all save its rulers,” sighed Maraquando, regretfully. “Nor is its population what it should be. I tell you, Señor, this land should be the most powerful in the world. It is the most favoured spot on earth—the garden of Paradise; but what with our incessant civil wars, our incompetent governors, and, of late, the tyranny of the Church, the whole continent is demoralised. Ah, if we but had the man who could weld all our foolish Republics into one great nation! Then, indeed, would we be the glory of the earth.”

“Don Hypolito Xuarez evidently looks upon himself as that man.”

“Don Hypolito!” echoed Maraquando, scornfully. “No, Señor; he has the instincts of a tyrant. He would grind down the people as the Conquistadores did their ancestors. Were he pure minded and noble in his ambition, I—even I, Miguel Maraquando—would support him. I would lay aside all prejudices to aid him to make our country great. But I know the man, Don Felipe. He is a half-bred, a treacherous scoundrel, who wants to be the Santa Anna of the Republic. Let him beware of Iturbide’s fate!”

“At all events, he intends to become Emperor,” persisted Philip, calmly.

“No! The Junta has decided that he is to be banished from Cholocaca. Already the fleet is at Acauhtzin to arrest him, and to-morrow we send up a special message that he is to be brought to Tlatonac at once.”

“Suppose he refuses to come?”

“He will be brought by force.”

“Always provided the fleet do not support his cause.”

“You, too, Señor,” said Maraquando, thoughtfully; “so said Don Juan last night. It may be so, and yet I hope, for the sake of the country, that the affair may be ended at once. I believe the navy will continue faithful. My own son, Don Rafael, is in command of one ship; yet I mistrust Xuarez and his oily tongue. Yes, Señor, I have thought much since Don Juan and the Señor Corresponsal spoke to me last night. I have conferred with His Excellency, the President. Therefore have we decided to send up a message to-morrow, ordering the return of the fleet with or without Xuarez. It does not do to trust him.”

“You have another man-of-war, then, to go to Acauhtzin.”

“No; we have a small steamer. But she is quick, and will go there and return in no time.”

“That is if she is permitted to do so,” thought Philip; but he did not say this aloud, lest Don Miguel should grow angry.

“Still, even if the fleet does revolt, we will have the torpederas,” said the Jefe, cheerfully. “They are now on their way from England. His Excellency received a telegram yesterday.”

“If you have the torpederas, you can do a good deal,” replied Philip, lighting a cigarette: “and if there is a war, Don Miguel, my yacht is at the service of the Government.”

“A thousand, thousand thanks, Señor!” said Miguel, smiling gratefully; “but I hope and trust there will be no occasion for us to ask you to make such a sacrifice. However, we shall soon know—in three days at the most. If the fleet are true to us, they will bring back Don Hypolito. If not, we shall know what steps to take to defend Tlatonac from being bombarded.”

“By the way, Señor,” said Cassim, thoughtfully, “you have a telegraph-station here. In which direction do the wires run?”

“Why do you ask, Señor?”

“Because the Señor Corresponsal wishes constant communication with England, should there be a war. Now, if the wires go north to Acauhtzin, they can be cut by Don Hypolito.”

“That is true, Don Felipe. Fortunately they do *not* run north. No; the wires run south to Janjalla which town will certainly remain faithful to the Government. From thence all messages can with ease be transmitted to England.”

Philip was pleased at this, as he saw that Tim would be enabled to transmit messages to England with the greatest ease, and thus cover himself with glory. They conversed for a few minutes on the subject, and then left the market for the alameda.

It was a most delightful promenade. High trees on either side, whose branches formed a green arcade above the heads of the promenaders. Beds of roses in profusion—brilliant tropical plants, bronze statues, marble statues, and plenty of pleasantly situated seats. One portion was reserved for those who chose to walk, another for horses and their riders. Hither came all the aristocracy of the city, when they grew weary of the zocala of the Plaza de los Hombres Ilustres, and on this day the alameda was crowded.

In a gaily decorated bandstand, an excellent company of musicians played bright music, mostly airs from comic operas, and Philip was amused to hear Offenbachian frivolities sounding in this spot. They seemed out of place. The musicians had no sense of the fitness of things. They should have played boleros fandangos—the national music of Spain—instead of which they jingled the trashy airs of minor musicians.

The alameda was thronged by a motley crowd, presenting more varied features than are to be seen in any other part of the world. Indian women squatting at the corners selling fruit and pulque, beautiful señoritas with black mantillas and eloquent fans, gay young cavaliers dashing along on spirited horses, in all the bravery of the national costume, and not seldom a sour-looking duenna, jealously watching her charge. Occasionally a priest in shovel-hat and black cassock—but these were very rare. The army was also represented by a number of gaily-dressed officers who smoked cigarettes, smiled at the señoritas, and clanked their huge spurs ostentatiously together. It was a gay scene, and Philip admired it greatly.

“I have never seen such a mixed crowd anywhere,” he said, lightly, “save in the Strada Reale in Valetta.”

“Well!” said Maraquando, after a pause, “and what do you think of Tlatonac?”

“It is a terrestrial Paradise,” replied Philip, “and Hypolito is the serpent.”

Chapter VII

Dolores

Your eyes
Are dark as midnight skies,
And bright as midnight stars,
Their glance
Is full of love's romance,
When no hate loving mars.

Oh let those eyes look down on me,
Oh let those glances wander free,
And I will take those stars to be
My guides for life,
Across the ocean of wild strife,
Dolores!

My heart
Those looks have rent apart,
And now 'tis torn in twain;
Oh take
That broken heart, and make
With kiss it whole again;
Oh lightly from thy lattice bend,
Give but a smile, and it will mend,
Then love will love be till we end
Our life of tears,
For some sweet life in yonder spheres,
Dolores!

The next day Jack came back with Dolores and Doña Serafina. He was puffed up with exceeding pride at his good fortune, for it is not every young man in Central America who gets a chance of talking unreservedly with the girl of his heart. The Cholocacans treat their women folk as do the Turks: shut them up from the insolent glances of other men, and only let them feel their power over the susceptible hearts of cavaliers at the yearly carnival. Jack never did approve of these Orientalisms, even in his days of heart-wholeness, and now that his future hinged on the smile of Dolores, he disapproved of such shuttings up more than ever.

Fortunately Don Miguel was not a Turk, and gave his womenfolk greater freedom than was usual in Tlatonac. Dolores and her cousin were not unused to masculine society, and Doña Serafina was the most good-natured of duennas. Consequently they saw a good deal of the creature man, and were correspondingly grateful for the seeing. Still, even in Cholocaca it is going too far to let a young unmarried fellow ride for many miles beside the caleza of two unmarried ladies. So far as Doña Serafina was concerned, it did not matter. She was old enough, and ugly enough, to be above suspicion; but Dolores—ah, ah!—the scandal-mongers of Tlatonac opened their black eyes, and whispered behind their black fans, when they heard of Don Miguel's folly, of the Señor Americano's audacity.

As a rule, Don Miguel, proud as Lucifer, would not have permitted Jack to escort his sister and niece in this way; but the prospect of a war had played havoc with social observances. Don Rafael was away, Don Miguel could not leave the capital, and the ladies certainly could not return by themselves, over bad roads infested by Indians. Thus, the affair admitted of some excuse, and Don Miguel was grateful to Jack for performing what should have been his duty. He did not know that the gratitude was all on the other side, and that Duval would have given years of his life for the pleasant journey, obtained with so little difficulty. If he had known—well, Don Miguel was not the most amiable of men, so there would probably have been trouble. As it was, however, the proud Spaniard knew nothing, not even as much as did the gossips of Tlatonac; so Jack duly arrived with his fair charges, and was duly thanked for his trouble by the grateful Maraquando. Fate was somewhat ironical in dealing with the matter.

That journey was a glimpse of Paradise to Jack, for he had Dolores all to himself. Doña Serafina, being asleep, did not count. A peon, with a long cigar, who was as stupid as a stone idol, drove the caleza containing the two ladies. Doña Serafina, overcome by her own stoutness, and the intense heat, slept

heavily, and Jack, riding close to the carriage, flirted with Dolores. There was only one inconvenience about this arrangement—the lovers could not kiss one another.

It was a long way from the estancia, but Jack wished it was longer, so delightful was his conversation with Dolores. She sat in the caleza flirting her big fan, and cooing like a dove, when her lover said something unusually passionate. Sometimes she sent a flash of her dark eyes through the veil of her mantilla, and then Jack felt queer sensations about the region of the heart. A pleasant situation, yet tantalising, since it was all the “thou art so near and yet so far” business, with no caresses or kisses. When the journey came to an end, they were both half glad, half sorry; the former on account of their inability to come to close quarters, the latter, because they well knew they would not again get such a chance of unwatched courting.

Eulalia, who guessed all this pleasantness, received her cousin with a significant smile, and took her off to talk over the matter in the solitude of the bedroom they shared together. Don Miguel seized on his sleepy sister in order to extract from her a trustworthy report as to how things were at the estancia, and Jack departed to his own house, to announce his arrival and that of Dolores.

It was late in the afternoon, for the journey, commencing at dawn, had lasted till close on four o'clock, and Jack found his three friends enjoying their siestas. He woke them up, and began to talk Dolores. When he had talked himself hoarse, and Peter asleep, quoth Philip—

“What about the railway works?”

“I haven't been near them,” said Jack, innocently; whereat Tim and Philip laughed so heartily that they made him blush, and awoke Peter.

“What are you talking about?” asked Peter sleepily.

“Jack's love affairs,” replied Philip, laughing.

“And by the same token we'll soon be talking of your own,” said Tim, cruelly. “If you only knew the way he's been carrying on with the black-eyed colleen, Jack!”

“Nonsense,” retorted Cassim, reddening; “I walked about Tlatonac with Don Miguel yesterday.”

“You flirted with Eulalia last night, anyhow.”

“Don't be jealous, Tim. It's a low-minded vice.”

“Oh, so that is the way the wind blows, Philip,” said Jack, stretching himself. “I knew you would fall in love with Eulalia. Now, it's no use protesting. I know the signs of love, because I've been through the mill myself.”

“Two days' acquaintance, and you say I love the girl! Try again, Jack.”

“Not I! Time counts for naught in a love affair. I fell in love with Dolores in two minutes!”

“Ah, that's the way with us all,” said Tim, reflectively. “When I was in Burmah, there was a girl in Mandalay—”

“Tim, we don't want any of your immoral stories. You'll shock Peter—confound him, he's asleep again, like the fat boy in Pickwick. Well, gentlemen both, I am about to follow the doctor's example. I've been riding all day, and feel baked.”

“How long do you intend to sleep, Jack?”

“An hour or so. Then we’ll have something to eat, and go off to Maraquando’s to see the ladies. We must introduce Peter to his future wife.”

“Begad, I may fall in love with Doña Serafina myself!”

“It’s possible, if you are an admirer of the antique,” retorted Jack, and went off to his bedroom for a few hours’ sleep. Even lovers require rest, and bucketing about on a half-broken horse for the best part of the day under a grilling sun was calculated to knock up even so tough a subject as Jack.

“Faith!” remarked Tim, when Jack’s long legs vanished through the doorway, “if old Serafina smiles on Peter, and those girls flirt with you and Jack, I’ll be left out in the cold. Another injustice to Ireland.”

“Come to the alameda to-morrow, and pick out a señorita to be your own private property.”

“What! and get a knife in my ribs. I’m more than seven, Philip. Why, there was once a girl in Cape Town who had a Boer for a sweetheart—”

“And you took the girl, and the Boer didn’t like it. I know that story, Tim. It’s a chestnut. You told it in that book of sketches you wrote. Go on with your work; I’m sleepy.”

“Ow—ow!” yawned Tim, lazily. “I’d like to sleep myself, but that I have to write up this interview with Gomez. Did I tell you about it, Philip?”

“Yes; you’ve told me three times, and given three different versions. Keep the fourth for *The Morning Planet*.”

“But the President said—”

“I know all about that,” muttered Philip, crossly. “What you said—what he said—what Maraquando said—and how you all lied against one another. Do let us sleep, Tim. First Jack, then you. Upon my—upon my word—upon—on!” and Philip went off into a deep slumber.

“I hope the interview with Gomez won’t have the same effect on my readers,” said Tim, blankly to himself, “or it’s the sack I’ll be getting. Come on with ye! ‘There will be no war’, said the President. That’s a lie, anyhow; but he said it, so down it goes. Oh, my immortal soul, it’s a liar I am.”

Then he began scratching the paper with a bad pen, and there was peace in the land.

That night they duly arrived at Maraquando’s house in order to ask how politics were progressing. This was the excuse given by three of them; but it was false, as Tim well knew. He alone took an interest in politics. Even Peter had ceased to care about Don Hypolito, and the opal stone, and the possible war. He—under orders from Jack and Philip, who wanted the girls to themselves—made himself agreeable to Doña Serafina. Unaccustomed, by reason of her plain looks, to such attentions, she enjoyed the novelty of the thing, and thought this fat little Americano delightful. It is true that their conversation was mostly pantomimic; but as the doctor knew a few words of Spanish, and Serafina had learnt a trifle of English from Jack, filtered through Dolores, they managed between them to come to a hazy understanding as to what they were talking about.

Never till that moment did Philip feel the infinite charm of that languorous Creole life, so full of dreams and idleness. Sitting beside Eulalia in the warm gloom, he listened to her sparkling conversation, and

stared vaguely at the beauty of the scene around him. In the patio all was moonlight and midnight—that is as regards the shadows, for the hour was yet early. Here and there in the violet sky trembled a star with mellow lustre, and the keen, cold shafts of moonlight, piercing the dusk, smote the flowers and tessellated pavement with silver rays. Pools of white light lay on the floor welling into the shadow even to the little feet of Eulalia. The court wore that unfamiliar look, so mysterious, so weird, which only comes with the night and the pale moon. And then—surely that was music—the trembling note of a guitar sounding from the shadowy corner in which Jack and Dolores were ensconced.

In the glimmering light Philip could see the grotesque gestures of Serafina and the doctor, as they pantomimed to one another on the azotea, and the red tip of Miguel's cigar, as he strolled up and down on the flat roof talking seriously with Tim. Through the warm air, heavy with the perfume of flowers, floated the contralto voice of Dolores. The song was in Spanish, and that noble tongue sounded rich and full over the sweeping music of the guitar. As translated afterwards by Philip (who dabbled in poetry), the words ran thus:

In Spain! ah, yes, in Spain!
 When day was fading,
 I heard you serenading,
While shed the moon her silver rain,
The nightingale your song was aiding,
My tresses dark I then was braiding,
When to my chamber upward springing
There came the burden of your singing,
Nor was that singing vain
In Spain—dear Spain.

From Spain! yes, far from Spain,
 We two now wander;
 And here as yonder
A hopeless love for me you feign.
Alas! of others thou art fonder,
And I, forsaken, sit and ponder.
Yet once again your voice is ringing,
I hear the burden of that singing.
Alas! I fled in vain
From Spain—dear Spain.

They applauded the song and the singer, Jack looking across to Philip as much as to say, "Isn't she an angel?" If Philip thought so, he did not say so, being busy with Eulalia. They were talking Chinese metaphysics, a pleasant subject to discuss with a pretty girl well up in the intricacies thereof. As to Jack and his angel!

"Querida!" murmured Dolores, slipping her hand into that of her lover's under cover of the darkness; "how lonely has my heart been without thee."

"Angelito," replied Jack, who was an adept at saying pretty things in Spanish; "I left behind my heart when I departed, and it has drawn me back to your side."

"Alas! How long will we be together, Juan? I am afraid of this war; should Don Hypolito conquer!" Here she paused and slightly shuddered.

"He shall not conquer, cara. What can he do with a few adherents against the power of the Government?"

“Still, the Indians—”

“You are afraid they will join with him. To what end? Xuarez cannot restore the worship of the Chalchuih Tlatonac.”

“Juan!” said Dolores, anxiously, “it is not of Xuarez I am so much afraid as of the Indians. If there is a war, they may carry me off.”

“Carry you off!” repeated Jack, in a puzzled tone of voice. “Why, how could they do that? and for what reason?”

“They could do it easily by some subtle device; bolts and bars and walled towns are nothing to them when they set their hearts on anything. And they would carry me away because I am the guardian of the Chalchuih Tlatonac.”

“Who told you all this?”

“Cocom.”

“But he does not worship the opal or the old gods. He is a devout Catholic.”

“So says Padre Ignatius; but I think he is one of those who go to the forest sanctuary. He knows much.”

“And says nothing. It is death for him to betray the secrets of that Aztec worship.”

“Listen, Juan, alma de mi alma. The life of Cocom was saved by my uncle Miguel, and with him gratitude is more powerful than religion. He told me while you were away, that the opal has prophesied war, and on that account the Indians are alarmed for me. Should there be no guardian of the opal, Huitzilopochtli will be angry, and lest I should be killed in the war as soon as the revolt takes place, the Indians will carry me for safety into the heart of the country—into those trackless forest depths more profound than the sea.”

“They shall never do so while I am at hand,” said Jack, fiercely; “but I don’t believe this story of Cocom’s. You cannot be in such danger.”

“I am afraid it is true; besides, that is not the only danger—Don Hypolito!”

“What of him?”

“He wishes to marry me, Juan.”

Duval laughed softly, and pressed the little hand, that lay within his own.

“You talk ancient history, querida; I thought we settled that I was to be the favoured one.”

“It is true! ah, yes, thee alone do I love,” whispered Dolores, tenderly; “but when you departed, Juan, he came to me, this Don Hypolito, and spoke of love.”

“Confound his impudence!” muttered Jack, in English.

“What say you, Juan? Oh, it was terrible! He said, if I became not his wife, that he would plunge the country into war. I did not believe that he could do so or would dare to do so. I refused. Then he spoke of my love for you, and swore to kill you.”

“He’ll have to catch me first, Dolores.”

“‘There will be war,’ said this terrible one, ‘and I will tear down the walls of Tlatonac to seize you. This Americano will I slay and give his body to the dogs.’ ”

“All idle talk, mi cara,” said Duval, scornfully; “I can protect myself and you. What more did he say?”

“Little more; but it was the same kind of talk. When he departed, I spoke to my uncle; but Don Hypolito had by that time gone to Acauhtzin.”

“Was Don Miguel angry?”

“Very angry! But he could do nothing. Don Hypolito was far away on the waters.”

“And will return with fire and blood,” said Jack, gloomily; “but never fear, Dolores. My friends and myself will protect you from this insolent one. If we are conquered, we shall fly to my own land in the vessel of Don Felipe!”

“But what of Eulalia?”

“Ah!” replied her lover, waggishly; “I think you can trust Don Felipe to look after Eulalia.”

“Do you think there will be a war, Juan?”

“It looks like it. However, we shall know for certain when the messenger comes back from Acauhtzin.”

“Yes; my uncle told me the boat had gone up to-day to bid the fleet return.”

“A wild-goose chase only,” thought Jack, but held his peace, lest he should alarm Dolores.

Fearful of attracting her uncle’s attention by speaking too much to Jack, the Spanish beauty crossed over to where Philip and Eulalia were sitting.

“Señor Felipe!” said Dolores, gaily, “wherefore do you laugh?”

“It is at Don Pedro and my good aunt,” replied Eulalia, before Philip could speak. “Behold them, Dolores, making signs like wooden puppets.”

Dolores turned her eyes towards the couple leaning over the azotea railing, and began to laugh also. Then Jack came over and demanded to be informed of the joke. He was speedily informed of the performance going on above; so that the two actors had quite an audience, although they knew it not. Indeed the affair was sufficiently grotesque. It was like a game of dumb crambo, as Peter acted a word, and the old lady tried to guess his meaning.

For instance, wishing to tell her how he captured butterflies, Peter wagged his hands in the air to indicate the flight of insects, then struck at a phantom beetle with an imaginary net.

“Pajaros!” guessed Doña Serafina, wrongly. Peter did not know this was the Spanish for ‘birds,’ and thought she had caught his meaning. The lady thought so too, and was delighted with her own perspicuity.

“Bueno, Señor! You catch birds! To eat?”

She imitated eating, whereon Peter shook his head though he was not quite sure if the Cholocacans did not eat beetles. Foreigners had so many queer customs.

Seeing Peter misunderstood, Doña Serafina skipped lightly across the azotea, flapping her arms, and singing. Then she turned towards the doctor, and nodded encouragingly.

“Birds!” she said, confidently. “You eat them?”

Now Peter knew that ‘comida’ meant eating; but quite certain that Doña Serafina did not devour beetles, set himself to work to show her what he really meant. He ran after imaginary butterflies round the azotea, and, in his ardour, bumped up against Tim.

“What the devil are you after?” said Tim, displeased at his conversation with Maraquando being interrupted. “Why can’t you behave yourself, you ill-conducted little person.”

“Do they eat beetles, here?” asked Tim, eagerly.

“Beetles! they’d be thin, if they did,” said Tim, drily. “I don’t know. Do you eat beetles, Señor?” he added, turning to Don Miguel.

The Spaniard made a gesture of disgust, and looked inquiringly at his sister.

“Los pajaros,” explained Doña Serafina, smiling.

“Oh, ‘tis birds she’s talking about!”

“Birds!” replied the doctor, blankly. “I thought I showed her butterflies. This way,” and he began hovering round again.

Tim roared.

“They’ll think you have gone out of what little mind you possess, Peter!”

“Ah, pobrecito,” said Serafina, when the meaning of the pantomime was explained, “I thought he was playing at a flying bird.”

“You’ll never make your salt as an actor, Peter,” jeered Tim, as they all laughed over the mistake. “I’d better call up Philip and Jack to keep you straight. Jack, come up here, and bring Philip with you.”

“All right,” replied Jack, from the depths below, where they had been watching the performance with much amusement; “we are coming.”

The quartette soon made their appearance in the azotea, where Peter’s mistake was explained.

“Do it again, Peter,” entreated Philip, laughing; “you have no idea how funny you look flopping about!”

"I shan't," growled the doctor, ruffled. "Why can't they talk English?"

"Doña Dolores can talk a little," said Jack, proudly "Señorita talk to my friend in his own tongue."

"It is a nice day," repeated Doña Dolores, slowly; "'ow do you do?"

"Quite well, thank you," replied Peter, politely; whereat his friends laughed again in the most unfeeling manner.

"Oh, you can laugh," said Peter, indignantly; "but if I was in love with a girl, I would teach her some better words than about the weather, and how do you do!"

"I have done so," replied Jack, quietly; "but those words are for private use."

At this moment Dolores, laughing behind her fan, was speaking to Doña Serafina, who thereupon advanced towards Peter.

"I can speak to the Americano," she announced to the company; then, fixing Peter with her eye, said, with a tremendous effort, "Darling!"

"Oh!" said the modest Peter, taken aback, "she said, 'darling'!"

"Darling!" repeated Serafina, who was evidently quite ignorant of the meaning.

"That's one of the words for private use, eh, Jack?" laughed Philip, quite exhausted with merriment. "A very good word. I must teach it to Doña Eulalia."

"It's too bad of you, Doña Dolores," said Jack, reproachfully; whereat Dolores laughed again at the success of her jest.

"Did the Señor have good sport with Cocom," asked Don Miguel, somewhat bewildered at all this laughter, the cause of which, ignorant as he was of English, he could not understand.

"Did you have a good time, Peter," translated Tim, fluently, "with the beetles."

"Oh, splendid! tell him splendid. I captured some Papilionidae! and a beautiful little glow-worm. One of the Elateridae species, and—"

"I can't translate all that jargon, you fat little humming-bird! He had good sport, Señor," he added, suddenly turning to Don Miguel.

"Bueno!" replied the Spaniard, gravely, "it is well."

It was no use trying to carry on a common conversation, as the party invariably split up into pairs. Dolores and Eulalia were already chatting confidentially to their admirers. Doña Serafina began to make more signs to Peter, with the further addition of a parrot-cry of "Darling," and Tim found himself once more alone with Don Miguel.

"I have written out my interview with the President," he said slowly; "and it goes to England to-morrow. Would you like to see it first, Señor?"

“If it so pleases you, Señor Correspoñsal.”

“Good! then I shall bring it with me to-morrow morning. Has that steamer gone to Acauhtzin yet?”

“This afternoon it departed, Señor. It will return in two days with the fleet.”

“I hope so, Don Miguel, but I am not very certain,” replied Tim, significantly. “His Excellency Gomez does not seem very sure of the fleet’s fidelity either.”

“There are many rumours in Tlatonac,” said Maraquando, impatiently. “All lies spread by the Oposidores—by Xuarez and his gang. I fear the people are becoming alarmed. The army, too, talk of war. Therefore, to set all these matters at rest, to-morrow evening his Excellency the President will address the Tlatonacians at the alameda.”

“Why at the alameda?”

“Because most of them will be assembled there at the twilight hour, Señor. It is to be a public speech to inspire our people with confidence in the Government, else would the meeting be held in the great hall of the Palacio Nacional.”

“I would like to hear Don Francisco Gomez speak, so I and my friends will be at the alameda.”

“You will come with me, Señor Correspoñsal,” said Miguel, politely; “my daughter, niece, and sister are also coming.”

“The more the merrier! It will be quite a party, Señor.”

“It is a serious position we are in,” said Maraquando, gravely; “and I trust the word of his Excellency will show the Tlatonacians that there is nothing to be feared from Don Hypolito.”

At this moment Doña Serafina, who had swooped down on her charges, appeared to say good night. Both Dolores and Eulalia were unwilling to retire so early, but their aunt was adamant, and they knew that nothing could change her resolution, particularly as she had grown weary of fraternising with Peter.

“Bueno noche tenga, Vm,” said Doña Serafina, politely, and her salutation was echoed by the young ladies in her wake.

“Con dios va usted, Señora,” replied Tim, kissing the old lady’s extended hand, after which they withdrew. Dolores managed to flash a tender glance at Jack as they descended into the patio, and Philip, leaning over the balustrade of the azotea caught a significant wave of Eulalia’s fan, which meant a good deal. Cassim knew all those minute but eloquent signs of love.

Shortly afterwards they also took their leave after refusing Maraquando’s hospitable offer of pulque.

“No, sir,” said Tim, as they went off to their own mansion; “not while there is good whisky to be had.”

“But pulque isn’t bad,” protested Jack, more for the sake of saying something than because he thought so.

“Well, drink it yourself, Jack, and leave us the crather!”

“Talking about ‘crathers,’ ” said Philip, mimicking Tim’s brogue, “what do you think of Doña Serafina, Peter?”

“A nice old lady, but not beautiful. I would rather be with Doña Eulalia.”

“Would you, indeed?” retorted Cassim, indignantly. “As if she would understand those idiotic signs you make.”

“They are quite intelligible to—”

“Be quiet, boys!” said Tim, as they stopped at the door of Jack’s house, “you’ll get plenty of fighting without starting it now. There’s going to be a Home Rule meeting to-morrow.”

“Where, Tim?”

“In the alameda, no less. His Excellency the Lord Lieutenant is to speak to the crowd.”

“He’ll tell a lot of lies, I expect,” said Jack, sagely. “Well, he can say what he jolly well pleases. I’ll lay any odds that before the week’s out war will be proclaimed.”

He was a truer prophet than he thought.

Chapter VIII

Viva El Republica

No king have we with golden crown,
To tread the sovereign people down;
All men are equal in our sight—
The ruler ranks but with the clown.

Our symbol is the opal bright,
Which darts its rays of rainbow light,
All men are equal in our sight—
Prophetic of all coming things,
Of blessing, war, disaster, blight.

Red glow abroad the opal flings,
To us the curse of war it brings;
All men are equal in our sight—
And evil days there soon shall be,
Beneath the war-god’s dreaded wings.

Yet knowing what we soon shall see,
We’ll boldly face this misery,
All men are equal in our sight—
And fight, though dark our fortunes frown,
For life, and home, and liberty.

Padre Ignatius always said that his flock were true and devout Catholics, who believed in what they ought to believe. Strictly speaking, the flock of Padre Ignatius was limited to the congregation of a little adobe church on the outskirts of the town, but his large heart included the whole population of Tlatonac in that

ecclesiastical appellation. Everyone knew the Padre and everyone loved him, Jesuit though he was. For fifty years had he laboured in the vineyard of Tlatonac, but when his fellow-labourers were banished, the Government had not the heart to bid him go. So he stayed on, the only representative of his order in all Cholacaca, and prayed and preached and did charitable works, as had been his custom these many years past. With his thin, worn face, rusty cassock, slouch hat, and kindly smile, Padre Ignatius, wonderfully straight considering his seventy years, attended to the spiritual wants of his people, and said they were devout Catholics. He always over-estimated human nature, did the Padre.

So far as the Padre saw, this might have been the case, and nobody having the heart to undeceive him, he grew to believe that these half-civilised savages were Christians to the bone; but there was no doubt that nine out of every ten in his flock were very black sheep indeed. They would kneel before the gaudy shrine of the adobe chapel, and say an Ave for every bead of the rosary, but at one time or another every worshipper was missing, each in his or her turn. They had been to the forest for this thing, for that thing; they had been working on the railway fifty miles inland, or fishing some distance up the coast. Such were the excuses they gave, and Padre Ignatius, simple-hearted soul, believed them, never dreaming that they had been assisting in the worship of the Chalchuih Tlatonac in the hidden temple of Huitzilopochtli.

The belief in the devil stone was universal throughout Cholacaca. Not only did the immediate flock of Padre Ignatius revere it as a symbol of the war-god, but every person in the Republic who had Indian blood in his or her veins firmly believed that the shining precious stone exercised a power over the lives and fortunes of all. Nor was such veneration to be wondered at, considering how closely the history of the great gem was interwoven with that of the country. The shrine of the opal had stood where now arose the cathedral; the Indian appellation of the jewel had given its name to the town; and the picture representation of the gem itself was displayed on the yellow standard of the Republic. Hardly any event since the foundation of the city could be mentioned with which the harlequin opal was not connected in some way. It was still adored in the forest temple by thousands of worshippers, and, unknown as it was to the padres, there were few peons, leperos, or mestizos who had not seen the gem flash on the altar of the god. Cholacacans of pure Spanish blood, alone refrained from actual worship of the devil stone, and even these were more or less tinctured with the superstition. It is impossible to escape the influence of an all-prevailing idea, particularly in a country not quite veneered by civilisation.

On this special evening, when President Gomez was to address the populace, and assure them that there would be no war, the alameda presented an unusually lively appearance. It had been duly notified that His Excellency would make a speech on the forthcoming crisis, hence the alameda was crowded with people anxious to hear the official opinion of the affair. The worst of it was, had Gomez but known it, that the public mind was already made up. There was to be war, and that speedily, for a rumour had gone forth from the sanctuary of the opal that the gem was burning redly as a beacon fire. Everyone believed that this foreboded war, and Gomez, hoping to assure the Tlatonacians of peace, might as well have held his tongue. They would not believe him as the opal stone had prophesied a contrary opinion. But beyond an idle whisper or so, Gomez did not know this thing, therefore he came to the alameda and spoke encouragingly to the people.

From all quarters of the town came the inhabitants to the alameda, and the vast promenade presented a singularly gay appearance. The national costumes of Spanish America were wonderfully picturesque, and what with the background of green trees, sparkling fountains, brilliant flower-beds, and, over all, the violet tints of the twilight, Philip found the scene sufficiently charming. He was walking beside Jack, in default of Eulalia, who, in company with Dolores, marched demurely beside Doña Serafina. This was a public place, the eyes of Tlatonac gossips were sharp, their tongues were bitter, so it behoved discreet young ladies, as these, to keep their admirers at a distance. In the patio it was quite different.

Tim had gone off with Don Miguel, to attach himself to the personal staff of the President, and take shorthand notes of the speech. It had been the intention of Peter to follow his Irish friend, but,

unfortunately, he lost him in the crowd, and therefore returned to the side of Philip, who caught sight of him at once.

“Where’s Tim?” asked the baronet, quickly; “gone off with Don Miguel?”

“Yes; to the Palacio Nacional.”

“I thought you were going?”

“I lost sight of them.”

“An excuse, Peter,” interposed Jack, with a twinkle in his eye. “You remained behind to look at the Señoritas.”

Peter indignantly repudiated the idea.

“His heart is true to his Poll,” said Philip, soothingly; “thereby meaning Doña Serafina. Darling!”

Philip mimicked the old lady’s pronunciation of the word, and Jack laughed; not so Peter.

“How you do go on about Doña Serafina?” he said fretfully. “After all, she is not so very ugly, though she may not have the thirty points of perfection.”

“Eh, Peter, I didn’t know you were learned in such gallantries; and what are the thirty points of perfection?”

The doctor was about to reply, when Cocom, wrapped in his zarape, passed slowly by, and took off his sombrero to the party.

“A dios, Señores,” said Cocom, gravely.

“Our Indian friend,” remarked Jack, with a smile. “Ven aca Cocom! Have you come to hear the assurance of peace.”

“There will be no peace, Señor Juan. I am old—very old, and I can see into the future. It is war I see—the war of Acauhtzin.”

“Ah! Is that your own prophecy or that of the Chalchuih Tlatonac.”

“I know nothing of the Chalchuih Tlatonac, Don Juan,” replied Cocom, who always assumed the role of a devout Catholic; “but I hear many things. Ah, yes, I hear that the Chalchuih Tlatonac is glowing as a red star.”

“And that means war!”

“It means war, Señor, and war there will be. The Chalchuih Tlatonac never deceives. Con dios va usted Señor.”

“Humph!” said Jack, thoughtfully, as Cocom walked slowly away; “so that is the temper of the people, is it? The opal says war. In that case it is no use Gomez saying peace, for they will not believe him.”

During this conversation with the Indian, Philip had gone on with Peter, so as to keep the ladies in sight. Jack pushed his way through the crowd and found them seated near the bandstand, from whence the President was to deliver his speech. As yet, His Excellency had not arrived, and the band were playing music of a lively description, principally national airs, as Gomez wished to arouse the patriotism of the Tlatonacians.

The throng of people round the bandstand was increasing every moment. It was composed of all sorts and conditions of men and women, from delicate señoritas, draped in lace mantillas, to brown-faced Indian women, with fat babies on their backs; gay young hidalgos, in silver-buttoned buckskin breeches, white ruffled shirts, and short jackets, and smart military men in the picturesque green uniform of the Republic. All the men had cigarettes, all the women fans, and there was an incessant chatter of voices as both sexes engaged in animated conversation on the burning subject of the hour. Here and there moved the neveros with their stock of ice-creams, grateful to thirsty people on that sultry night, the serenos keeping order among the Indians with their short staves, and many water-carriers with their leather clothes and crocks. Above the murmur of conversation arose the cries of these perambulating traders. "Tortillas de cuajuda," "Bocadillo de Coco," and all the thousand and one calls announcing the quality of their goods.

Many of the ladies were driving in carriages, and beside them rode caballeros, mounted on spirited horses, exchanging glances with those whom they loved. The air of the alameda was full of intrigue and subtle understandings. The wave of a fan, the glance of a dark eye, the dropping of a handkerchief, the removal of a sombrero, all the mute signs which pass between lovers who dare not speak, and everywhere the jealous watching of husbands, the keen eyes of vigilant duennas.

"It is very like the Puerta del Sol in Madrid," said Philip in a low whisper, as he stood beside Eulalia; "the same crowd, the same brilliance, the same hot night and tropic sky. Upon my word, there is but little difference between the Old Spain and the New."

"Ah!" sighed Eulalia, adjusting her mantilla; "how delightful it must be in Madrid!"

"Not more delightful than here, Señorita. At least, I think so—now."

Eulalia cast an anxious glance at her duenna, and made a covert sign behind her fan for him to be silent.

"Speak to my aunt, Don Felipe!"

"I would rather speak to you," hinted Philip, with a grimace.

"Can young ladies speak to whom they please in your country?"

"I should rather think so. In my country the ladies are quite as independent as the gentlemen, if not more so."

"Oh, oh! El viento que corre es algo fresquito."

"The wind which blows is a little fresh," translated Philip to himself; "I suppose that is the Spanish for 'I don't believe you.' But it is true, Señorita," he added quickly, in her own tongue; "you will see it for yourself some day."

"I fear not. There is no chance of my leaving Tlatonac."

"Who knows?" replied Philip, with a meaning glance.

Eulalia cast down her eyes in pretty confusion. Decidedly this Americano was delightful, and remarkably handsome; but then he said such dreadful things. If Doña Serafina heard them—Eulalia turned cold at the idea of what that vigorous lady would say.

“Bueno!” chattered the duenna at this moment; “they are playing the ‘Fandango of the Opal!’ ”

This was a local piece of music much in favour with the Tlatonacians, and was supposed to represent the Indian sacred dance before the shrine of the gem. As the first note struck their ears, the crowd applauded loudly; for it was, so to speak, the National Anthem of Cholacaca. Before the band-stand was a clear space of ground, and, inspired by the music, two Mestizos, man and woman, sprang into the open, and began to dance the fandango. The onlookers were delighted, and applauded vehemently.

They were both handsome young people, dressed in the national costume, the girl looking especially picturesque with her amber-coloured short skirt, her gracefully draped mantilla, and enormous black fan. The young fellow had castanets, which clicked sharply to the rhythm of the music, as they whirled round one another like Bacchantes. The adoration of the opal, the reading of the omen, the foretelling of successful love, all were represented marvellously in wonderful pantomime. Then the dancers flung themselves wildly about, with waving arms and mad gestures, wrought up to a frenzy by the inspiring music. Indeed, the audience caught the contagion, and began to sing the words of the opal song—

Breathe not a word while the future divining,
True speaks the stone as the star seers above,
Green as the ocean the opal is shining,
Green is prophetic of hope and of love.

Kneel at the shrine while the future discerning,
See how the crimson ray strengthens and glows;
Red as the sunset the opal is burning,
Red is prophetic of death to our foes.

At this moment, the carriage of the President, escorted by a troop of cavalry, arrived at the band-stand. The soldiers, in light green uniforms, with high buff boots, scarlet waistbands, and brown sombreros, looked particularly picturesque, but the short figure of the President, arrayed in plain evening dress, appeared rather out of place amid all this military finery. The only token of his Excellency’s rank was a broad yellow silk ribbon, embroidered with the opal, which he wore across his breast. Miguel Maraquando and Tim were in the carriage with the President, and the Irishman recognised his friends with a wave of his hand.

“Tim is in high society,” said Peter, with a grin. “We will have to call him Don Tim after this.”

“We’ll call you ‘Donkey’ after this, if you make such idiotic remarks,” replied Jack, severely. “Be quiet, doctor, and listen to the speechifying.”

The President was received with acclamation by those in the alameda, which showed that Tlatonac was well disposed towards the established Government. It is true that one or two friends of Xuarez attempted to get up a counter demonstration; but the moment they began hissing and shouting for Don Hypolito, the serenos pounced down and marched them off in disgrace. His Excellency, attended by Don Miguel and several other members of the Junta, came forward, hat in hand, to the front of the band-stand, and, after the musicians had stopped playing the “Fandango,” began to speak. Gomez was a fat little man, of no very striking looks; but when he commenced speaking, his face glowed with enthusiasm, and his rich, powerful voice reached everyone clearly. The man was a born orator, and, as the noble tongue of Castille rolled

sonorously from his mouth, he held his mixed audience spell-bound. The listeners did not believe in his assurances, but they were fascinated by his oratory.

It was a sight not easily forgotten. The warm twilight, the brilliant equatorial vegetation, the equally brilliant and picturesque crowd, swaying restlessly to and fro; far beyond, through a gap in the trees, in the violet atmosphere, the snow-clad summit of Xicotencatl, the largest of Cholocacan volcanoes, and everywhere the vague languor of the tropics. Gomez, a black figure against the glittering background of uniforms, spoke long and eloquently. He assured them that there would be no war. Don Hypolito Xuarez had no supporters; the Junta was about to banish him from the country; the prosperity of Cholocaca was fully assured; it was to be a great nation; he said many other pleasant things, which flattered, but deceived not the Tlatonacians.

“Yes, señores,” thundered the President, smiting his breast, “I, who stand here—even, I, Francisco Gomez, the representative of the Republic of Cholocaca—tell you that our land still rests, and shall rest under the olive tree of Peace. We banish Don Hypolito Xuarez—we banish all traitors who would crush the sovereign people. The rulers of Cholocaca, elected by the nation, are strong and wise. They have foreseen this tempest, and by them it will be averted. Believe not, my fellow-countrymen, the lying rumours of the streets! I tell you the future is fair. There will be no war!”

At this moment he paused to wipe his brow, and then, as if to give the lie to his assertion, in the dead silence which followed, was heard the distant boom of a cannon. Astonished at the unfamiliar sound, the Tlatonacians looked at one another in horror. Gomez paused, handkerchief in hand, with a look of wonderment on his face. No one spoke, no one moved, it was as though the whole of that assemblage had been stricken into stone by some powerful spell.

In the distance sounded a second boom, dull and menacing, there was a faint roar far away as of many voices. It came nearer and nearer, and those in the alameda began to add their voices to the din. Was the city being shelled by the revolting war-ships; had Don Hypolito surprised the inland walls with an army of Indians. Terror was on the faces of all—the clamour in the distance came nearer, waxed louder. A cloud of dust at the bend of the avenue, and down the central walk, spurring his horse to its full speed, dashed a dishevelled rider. The horse stopped dead in front of the band-stand, scattering the people hither and thither like wind-driven chaff; a young man in naval uniform flung himself to the ground, and ran up to the astonished President.

“Your Excellency, the fleet have revolted to Don Hypolito Xuarez! He is entrenched in the rebel town of Acauhtzin. I alone have escaped, and bring you news that he has proclaimed war against the Republic!”

A roar of rage went up to the sky.

“The opal! The prophecy of the Chalchuih Tlatonac!” cried the multitude. “Viva el Republica! Death to the traitor Xuarez!”

Gomez was listening to the messenger, who talked volubly. Then the President turned towards the people, and, by a gesture of his hand, enjoined silence. The roar at once sank to a low murmur.

“What Don Rafael Maraquando says is true,” said Gomez, loudly. “This traitor, Xuarez, has seduced the allegiance of the fleet—of Acauhtzin. The Republic must prepare for war—”

He could speak no further, for his voice was drowned in the savage roaring of the multitude. Everyone seemed to have gone mad. The crowd of people heaved round the band-stand like a stormy sea. A thousand voices cursed the traitor Xuarez, lauded the Republic, and repeated the prophecy of the harlequin opal. The whole throng was demoralised by the news.

“War! War! To Acauhtzin!” roared the throats of the mob. “Death to Xuarez! Viva el Republica! Viva libertad!”

Gomez made a sign to the band, which at once burst out into the Fandango of the Opal. A thousand voices began singing the words, a thousand people began to dance wildly. Ladies waved their handkerchiefs, men shouted and embraced one another, and amid the roar of the mob and the blare of the band, Don Francisco Gomez entered his carriage and drove away escorted by the cavalry.

Tim fought his way through the crowd down from the band-stand, and reached the Maraquando part, where he found the three ladies, more excited than frightened, standing for safety in the circle formed by the five men. Two of the men were embracing—Don Miguel and his son.

“It’s a great day for Cholocaca,” cried Tim, excitedly. “I wouldn’t have missed it for a fortune. Viva el Republica! Ah, Peter, my boy, this is better than the butterflies.”

“My son! my son, how did you escape?” said Don Miguel, throwing his arms round Rafael’s neck.

“I will tell you all at the house, my father,” replied the young man. “Let us go now with the ladies to our home. Señores,” he added, turning to the Englishmen, “you will come, too, I trust?”

It was no easy matter to get through the crowd, but ultimately the five men managed to push a path to a caleza for the ladies, placed them therein, and when it drove off, hastened themselves to the Casa Maraquando.

The whole city was in commotion. In the Plaza de los Hombres Ilustres a crowd had collected to salute the great yellow standard of the Republic, which streamed from the tower of the Palacio Nacional.

“The opal! the opal! The prophecy of the Tlatonac Chalchuih,” roared the crowd, stamping and yelling.

“They will believe in that stone more than ever now,” whispered Philip to Jack, as they entered the zaguan of Maraquando’s house. “What do you think of it, Jack?”

“Oh, it’s easy to prophesy when you know,” retorted Jack, scornfully. “Of course, Xuarez told the Indians he was going to revolt, and the priests of the temple have used the information to advertise the stone. Of course it grew red, and prophesied war under the circumstances. That is all the magic about the affair.”

In the patio the ladies were waiting for them in a state of great excitement, and welcomed Don Rafael as one returned from the dead. He embraced his sister, cousin, and aunt; which privilege was rather envied by the four friends, as regards the first two, and was then formally introduced to the Englishmen. His eye flashed as he saluted Tim and heard his vocation.

“You will have plenty to write about, Señor Correspoñsal,” he said, fiercely; “there will be a war, and a bitter war too. I have barely escaped with my life from Acauhtzin.”

“Tell me all about it, Señor,” said Tim, taking out his pocket-book; “and the news will go off to London to-night.”

“A thousand regrets, Señor Correspoñsal, that I cannot give you a detailed account at present, but I am worn out. I have not slept for days!”

“Pobrecito,” cried the ladies, in a commiserating tone.

"I will, at all events, tell you shortly," resumed Rafael, without taking any notice of the interruption. "I commanded *The Pizarro*, and went up to Acauhtzin to arrest Xuarez, according to the order of the Government. As he refused to surrender, and as the town had declared in his favour, I thought we would have to bombard it. But think, Señores, think. When I came back to my ship, I was arrested by my own crew, by my own officers. Seduced by the oily tongue of Xuarez, they had revolted. In vain I implored! I entreated! I threatened! I commanded! They refused to obey any other than the traitor Xuarez. The other ships behaved in the same way. All the officers who, like myself, were known to be true to the Government, were arrested and thrown into prison, I among the number."

"Ay de mi," cried Serafina, in tears, "what an indignity!"

Don Rafael was choking with rage, and forgot his manners.

"Carambo!" he swore roundly, "behold me, gentlemen. Look at my uniform! Thus was it insulted by the rebels of Acauhtzin, whose houses, I hope, with the blessing of God, to burn over their heads. I swear it!"

He wrenched a crucifix from his breast, and kissed it passionately. It was a striking scene: the dim light, the worn-out young fellow in the ragged uniform, and his figure black against the lights in the patio, passionately kissing the symbol of his faith.

"How did you escape, my son," said Maraquando, whose eyes were flashing with hatred and wrath.

"There was a man—one of my sailors, to whom I had shown favour—he was made one of the prison guards, and, out of kindness, assisted me to escape; but he was too fearful to help any of the others. In the darkness of night, I cut through my prison bars with a file he had given me. I climbed down the wall by a rope, and, when on the ground, found him, waiting me. He hurried me down to the water's edge, and placed me in a boat with food for a few days. I rowed out in the darkness, past the ships, and luckily managed to escape their vigilance. Then I hoisted the sail, and, as there was a fair wind, by dawn I was far down the coast. I need not tell you all my adventures, how I suffered, how I starved, how I thirsted—cursed, cursed, Xuarez!"

He stamped with rage up and down the patio while the ladies exclaimed indignantly at the treatment to which he had been subjected. Then he resumed his story hurriedly, evidently wishing to get it over—

"This morning, I fortunately fell in with the steamer sent up by the Government, which picked me up. I told the captain all, and he returned at once with the news, arriving at Tlatonac some time ago. I ordered him to fire those guns announcing my arrival, and hearing his Excellency was addressing a meeting at the alameda, jumped on a horse and rode here. The rest you know."

"Good!" said Tim, who had been busily taking notes, "I'm off to the telegraph-office, Señores. Good night."

Tim went off, and the others were not long in following his example. Overcome by fatigue, Don Rafael had fallen, half-fainting, in a chair, and the ladies were attending to him; so, seeing they were rather in the way, Jack and his friends, saying good night, left the house.

The city was still heaving with excitement. Bands of men went past dancing and singing. The bells clashed loudly from every tower, and every now and then a rocket scattered crimson fire in the sky. War was proclaimed! the whole of Tlatonac was in a state of frenzy, and there would be no sleep for anyone that night.

"We're in for it now," said Jack, jubilantly, "hear the war-song!"

A band of young men with torches tramped steadily towards the Square, singing the National Anthem of Tlatonac. Philip caught the last two lines roared triumphantly as they disappeared in the distance:

Red as the sunset the opal is burning,
Red is prophetic of death to our foes.

Chapter IX

The Call To Arms

Ta ra ra! Ta ra ra!
The trumpets are blowing,
And thrice hath their brazen notes pealed.
To battle! to battle the soldiers are going,
To conquer or die on the field.
On, soldiers! brave soldiers, who venture your lives
You fight for your country and sweethearts and wives.

Ta ra ra! Ta ra ra!
The drums roll like thunder,
And women's tears falling like rain.
For lovers! for lovers are parted asunder,
Till victory crowns the campaign.
On, soldiers! brave soldiers go forth to the fray,
And close with the foe in their battle array.

Ta ra ra! Ta ra ra!
The banners are flying,
And horses prance proudly along,
For women! for women are bitterly crying,
As passes the red-coated throng.
On, soldiers! brave soldiers! soon homeward you'll ride,
Encircled with bay leaves and greeted with pride.

At this eventful moment of its history, Cholocaca woke from its slumber of years, as did the Sleeping Beauty from her century sleep. No more the lethargic life, the indolent enjoyments, the languorous dreamings in an enchanted city. A sharp breath of war from the north swept away the sedative atmosphere; the thunder of the cannon roused Tlatonac to unexampled excitement. Rebellion and preparation for invasion at Acauhtzin, indignation and preparation for defence, for punishment in the capital of the Republic. In these days of alarm and danger, the city resembled one vast camp, and the descendants of the Conquistadores, the posterity of the Mayas, proved themselves to be not unworthy of their glorious traditions, both Spanish and Indian. It was a turning-point in the history of the Republic.

The two persons most desirous for the speedy commencement of this fratricidal war were Tim and Don Rafael: the former as he wished information for his journal, the latter because he was burning to revenge the insults and indignities to which he had been subjected by the rebels at Acauhtzin. Jack was rather dismayed at the near prospect of hostilities, fearing lest harm should result therefrom to Dolores at the hands of Don Hypolito, or those of the Forest Indians. For their part, Philip and Peter assumed a neutral position, the one from indolence, the other because he was entomologically engaged. What was the hunting of men compared with the hunting of butterflies, the capture of rebels with the capture of rare beetles? No, Peter preferred science to war.

The loss of the fleet was a great blow to the strength of the Government, as it, comparatively speaking, placed the capital at the mercy of the rebel, Xuarez. Communication between the two places was only possible by water, owing to the roughness and savagery of the interior, so the Government were unable to march their troops to Acauhtzin, and nip the rebellion in the bud. On the other hand, as soon as Xuarez had completed his plans, he would doubtless come south with his ships and bombard Tlatonac from the sea. Most of the city being built on the hill, topped by the vast fabric of the cathedral, offered considerable advantages to the besiegers, and as their vessels would keep well out of the range of the forts, it would be difficult to silence their guns.

From this point of view the outlook was certainly not encouraging, but the Junta did its best by every possible means to guard against possible contingencies. The army was drawn up in the Plaza de San Jago, and reviewed by the President in person. He made a brilliant speech, reminded the troops of their glorious predecessors, who had thrown off the yoke of Spain, implored them not to disgrace the Flag of the Opal, and promised them a speedy victory over these audacious rebels if they would but be true to their leaders. The troops received this patriotic oration with acclamation, cheered the brave little man at the conclusion of his address, uncovered to salute the flag of Cholocaca, and swore, one and all, to leave no rebel alive in Acauhtzin or elsewhere. It was a scene of tremendous excitement, and patriotism was at fever-heat in Tlatonac the whole of the day.

The great banner of the Republic, only seen on special feast-days, was on this occasion brought forth from the Treasury by order of Gomez and displayed to the troops. It was truly a gorgeous flag. Composed of yellow silk, covered with featherwork, after the manner of the Aztecs, it glittered in the sunlight like a vast jewel. The sacred stone in the centre was represented by a cluster of real opals from Queretaro, and the red, green, blue, and yellow rays therefrom were composed of ruby, emerald, turquoise and topaz stones. It was the sacred ensign of Cholocaca, the palladium of the Republic, and in the estimation of the inhabitants was held to be as sacred as the holy standard of the Osmanli. When its splendours streamed in the warm air, with flash of feather and glitter of jewel, a shout arose from soldiers and civilians alike which might have been heard at Acauhtzin. With that flag waving over them the Tlatonacians could not think of anything but victory.

"It is like the standard of Harold at the Battle of Hastings," said Philip, looking at the splendid flag. "It is to be hoped it will not bring Gomez such bad luck."

"Not a bit of it, my boy," replied Tim, who was busy with his inevitable note-book. "We're going to be the death and glory lads this time, anyhow."

"You quite identify yourself with the Government, I see, Tim," remarked Peter, who was standing by the caleza of Doña Serafina.

"What!" shouted Tim, playfully, "have we a traitor here? Away with ye, Peter, or I'll stick a pin in you, like one of those butterflies you're so fond of impaling. Don't I come of a fighting family myself?"

"Is the Señor Correspoñsal angry?" asked Dolores of Jack, in alarm.

"No, Señorita; he is patriotic. His nation always make a noise when they grow patriotic. Sing the 'Wearing of the Green,' Tim," he added, in English.

"By St. Patrick! 'tis the 'Opal Fandango' I'll have to learn, sir. Be quiet, Jack. The troops are marching past the saluting-point."

The great standard was waving over the heads of the Presidential staff, near which were the Maraquando party and their friends. Don Miguel himself was with His Excellency, mounted on a fiery steed, which he

managed with the consummate ease of a practised rider. The band was playing the “March of Zuloaga,” in allusion to the hero who had founded the Republic. To its stirring strains the troops marched past, saluting Gomez and his officers as each regiment came abreast of the flag.

The Plaza de San Jago, a vast clear space used for the parade-ground of the Cholocacan army, was quite filled with the troops, as there could not have been less than two thousand present. This was not the full power of the army, for Janjalla, Chichimec, Puebla de los Naranjos, and many of the inland towns, were garrisoned with troops. Already messages had been sent to the commandants of these outlying garrisons to march with their full strength of men to the capital, but as yet they had not arrived, and the two thousand soldiers present in the great plaza represented all the men at the immediate disposal of the Government.

It was a splendid sight to see these soldiers marching past the saluting-point, as, with few exceptions, they were a fine body of men. The uniforms were gaudy, and somewhat fantastical, and each regiment had its special flag and appellation. There was the Regimiento de los Pajaros, whose banner, like that of the Republic, was composed of humming-bird’s feathers; the Regimiento de Zuloaga, who marched under the pictured face of the founder of Cholocaca; the Regimiento de Fray Medina, bearing the pennant of the Church, embroidered with the cathedral of which that monk was the builder; and many others, all looking ready and fit for work in the field. The eyes of the President flashed with enthusiasm as file after file of men ranged past and the inspiring music of the “Zuloaga March” added not a little to the patriotism of his feelings.

“Xuarez is already conquered,” he said to Maraquando, who rode beside him. “He can oppose no troops to ours.”

“With the exception of the Regimiento de Huitzilopochtli, which is at present at Acauhtzin and has doubtless embraced his cause.”

“True, Señor, and he also will stir up the Indians!”

“I do not care for the Indians,” replied Maraquando, quietly, “they cannot stand against troops armed as ours. If he attacks Tlatonac by land he will be beaten, but Xuarez is too crafty to venture so rashly. He has the fleet, and will blockade the city.”

“Let him do so,” retorted Gomez, in a fiery tone; “we do not depend on foreign countries for our food. He cannot starve us out.”

“True enough; but while he has the fleet he can prolong the war to an indefinite period. Unless we can march our troops to Acauhtzin, and crush him at his head-quarters, there is no way of bringing the rebellion to a conclusion.”

“And we have no ships! Carambo! It is unfortunate. But no matter. The Republic is rich; she has money! We will send for ships of war, for guns, for engineers, and sooner or later will invest Acauhtzin. Then Xuarez will meet with the fate he deserves.”

At this moment the crack cavalry regiment of Cholocaca passed proudly by, with waving plumes and prancing horses. Deprived of his ship by Xuarez, Don Rafael had asked for and obtained a commission in this corps, and was now riding at the head of his men with his brother officers. Accustomed from childhood, like all American Spaniards, to horses, he had no difficulty in exchanging the deck for the saddle, and looked a gallant figure as he dashed past on his fiery mustang.

“Egad, Jack, we must enlist also, like Don Rafael,” said Philip, gaily, as they saw the young man gallop past. “Doña Dolores,” he added, turning to her, “we are going to become soldiers.”

“In the Regimiento de las Señoritas!” exclaimed Doña Eulalia, clapping her hands.

“What, señorita! A regiment of women?”

“Oh no!” interposed Doña Serafina, with a fascinating smile; “it is a corps raised in the last war by the ladies of Tlatonac. See! here come the valiant ones.”

“Foot soldiers!” said Jack, in disgust, as the regiment filed past; “no, Doña Serafina. Nothing less than a cavalry corps will suit us.”

“But can Don Pedro ride, Señor?”

“What’s that about me?” asked Peter, overhearing his name.

“Doña Serafina wants you to enlist,” explained Philip, maliciously.

“No,” replied Peter, firmly; “I will physic the soldiers, and cut off their legs and arms; but I am a man of peace, and I will not enlist.”

“You little duffer!” said Tim, reverting to his school-boy phraseology, “we’ll make you doctor of the regiment. I’d like to enlist myself, but the editor would never hear of such a thing. It’s my walking ticket I’d be getting if I did.”

“Well, Philip and myself shall enlist,” observed Jack, brightly. “You, Peter, shall attend to us when we are wounded, and Tim shall cover us with glory in the columns of *The Morning Planet*. He shall be the bard to celebrate our deeds.”

This scheme was explained to the ladies and found much favour in their sight. In fact, the whole female population of Tlatonac was seized with a violent attack of “scarlet fever,” and no one who was not a soldier found any favour in their eyes.

“You will be as valiant as the Cid,” said Dolores, looking tenderly at Jack from behind her black fan.

“With you to smile on me, I can scarcely be a coward,” he replied, in a low tone so as not to reach the vigilant ears of the duenna. “I will ask His Excellency for a commission in your cousin’s regiment.”

“And you also, Don Felipe,” said Eulalia, vivaciously. “El Regimiento del Caballeros is the finest in the army. You would look so well in the uniform.” She flashed a bewitching look at Philip, which sent that young man’s blood spinning through his veins. He had quite given up fighting against his fate, and was fathoms deep in love. Doña Eulalia could use her eyes with great effect, and Philip had now surrendered at discretion. It is only fair to say that the victress took no undue advantage of her conquest. Indeed, Philip did not know yet if she returned his love. Eulalia was a born coquette, and he was terribly afraid lest she should be only amusing herself. This enlistment in the army might clinch the matter, and induce her to smile on his suit.

“For your sake, I will play the bear,” he whispered, alluding to a foolish custom of the Cholocacans whereby a young man walks up and down in front of the window of his beloved like a bear.

“No; I do not care for you to play the bear, Señor. Fight in the regiment of my brother, and when you return victorious—well, who knows?”

Philip looked, Eulalia smiled significantly. They thoroughly understood one another, in spite of Doña Serafina and the restrictions of Cholocacan courtship. Eyes can speak as eloquently as can tongues, and are quite as intelligible—to the initiated.

“Kismet!” muttered Philip, as he went off the parade-ground with the ladies and his friends; “it is, written.”

“What is written?” asked Peter, who was always overhearing what was not meant for his ears.

“Your marriage to Doña Serafina,” laughed Philip, promptly; whereat the doctor shook his head.

“A man can’t marry his grandmother.”

Philip said no more; but returned to the side of Doña Eulalia, who had placed herself as far away from her duenna as was possible. This precaution was scarcely needed, as Doña Serafina had eyes for no one but Peter. She had not yet given up all hope of marriage, even at the mature age of five and forty. Peter was young and innocent; therefore Doña Serafina selected him as her victim, and under the guise of teaching him Spanish, strove to entangle him in her elderly meshes. Her eyes were still brilliant, and long experience had taught her how to use them. It was so much waste time as regards Peter. He was so impossible.

On leaving the Plaza de San Jago, the troops marched to their several quarters in the forts, and his Excellency the President went to inspect the defences of the city. Tlatonac was completely girdled by strong stone walls, and defended by heavy metal cannon, so that in the event of a sortie, particularly by a horde of naked Indians such as Xuarez’s force would be, there was but little doubt that the invaders could be easily repulsed with great slaughter. As regards a land attack from the interior, this was well enough, but if Xuarez bombarded the town there was no doubt that he could speedily reduce Tlatonac to a heap of ruins. Gomez trusted to the impassable forests between the capital and Acauhtzin to protect him from an inland invasion, and as the sea-forts were defended by heavy guns, hoped to cripple the ships of the enemy before they could do much harm.

The forts defending the coast were therefore the most important in his eyes, and, after examining the interior defences, he rode down to the sea front to inspect the preparations for keeping the ships of Xuarez beyond bombarding distance of the town. Thanks to English engineers, and a lavish outlay of money, the forts were superb pieces of workmanship; and their lofty walls frowning over the bay, with the muzzles of guns protruding from their embrasures, promised a difficult task to the invaders.

Between the two principal forts was the gate of the town, which opened into a low stretch of land covered with fishing-huts, through which a road ran down to the wharf. *The Bohemian* was lying close under the guns of the city, so that in the event of their being discharged, she would sustain no damage; and as His Excellency rode out of the city gate, his eyes rested admiringly on the beautiful little craft.

Only momentarily, however, for at that instant a cry burst from the lips of his aide-de-camp; and Gomez looked seaward.

“*The Pizarro!*” he cried in surprise.

It was indeed the old ship of Don Rafael, which was steaming slowly southward, a white flag fluttering at her mainmast head. Rafael uttered an ejaculation of rage, and Gomez turned his horse to ride back into the city, not knowing with what intentions the war-ship had come.

“One moment, Señor,” said Tim, catching the President’s horse by the bridle; “the vessel has a white flag, so she has come with a message from Acauhtzin.”

“Por Dios, we do not treat with rebels, Señor Correspoñsal.”

“Do not be rash, Excelencia. It is as well to know all these dogs have to say. See! they are lowering a boat.”

This was indeed the case. A quarter of a mile from the shore, *The Pizarro* cast anchor, fired three guns with blank cartridge, and then the boat already lowered was seen pulling straight for the wharf.

“Bueno! Señor Correspoñsal,” said Gormez, sorely against his will; “let it be as you say. We will wait here for their leader. But I am sorely tempted to order the forts to open fire on that boat.”

“A mistake, Excelencia,” interposed Maraquando at this moment; “we are civilised people, and must observe the rules of war. Besides,” he added significantly, letting his eyes rest on Tim, “have we not here the Correspoñsal? and all we do he will write off to England.”

“Bueno!” said the President again; “we will wait.”

The thunder of the cannon had brought a tremendous crowd to the walls, and down on to the beach. From the Presidential staff up to the gate, was one black mass of people, heaving with excitement. All kinds of rumours were flying from lip to lip. *The Pizarro* had come to bombard the town, and her consorts were now on their way for the same purpose. The vessel had returned to its allegiance, and had brought Xuarez to Tlatonac for punishment. All were disturbed, startled, puzzled, and watched with lynx eyes the little boat with the white flag at its stern now drawing steadily near to the wharf.

“What’s up now, Tim?” asked Philip, pushing his way through the crowd.

“A message from Don Hypolito, no less,” replied Fletcher, without turning round. “See! he is standing up in the boat. Be Jove! it’s a priest.”

“It must be Padre Ignatius,” cried Jack, who had a remarkably keen sight. “He went up to Acauhtzin, on some Church business, a week or so ago. Shovel-hat, white hair! Carambo! It *is* Padre Ignatius!”

The name of the priest speedily became known, and the crowd cheered, for the Padre was well known in Tlatonac. Gomez swore.

“Carrajo! He sends the Padre to make terms!”

“Terms with those dogs!” cried Don Rafael, stamping his foot. “Excelencia, I would hang them all.”

“Como, no!” muttered the President, his fingers closing viciously on the bridle-rein; “but we will hear what the Padre has to say.”

By this time the boat had reached the wharf, and Padre Ignatius, nimble as a young man, sprang up the wooden steps leading from the water. The moment he was out of the boat it turned seaward again, and before the onlookers could recover from their surprise, the oars were flashing in and out of the waves as it sped back to the war-ship. A roar of rage burst from the lips of all.

“Por Dios!” swore Maraquando, livid with wrath, “they have only landed the Padre, and now take themselves out of danger. Order the forts to open fire, Excelencia!”

Gomez had only to throw up his hand and the cannon would vomit fire. Knowing this, Jack stepped up impulsively to the President.

“Be not hasty, Señor, I beg of you. See, the Padre carries a white flag! He brings a message from Xuarez! First hear what it is, and then decide.”

His Excellency moved uneasily in his saddle, and bit his nether lip. He would dearly have liked to have pounded the rebel war-ship into matchwood for her insolent daring in thus defying the Government of Cholocaca, but he could not but see that such an extreme measure would be impolitic. Therefore he restrained his rage, and waited the approach of the Padre, who was now near at hand. Gomez, a true son of the Church, uncovered as the priest paused before him. The Padre raised his hand in token of benediction, and the staff also uncovered. With the atheistical opinions now prevalent in Cholocaca they would not have done this for any priest save Padre Ignatius, who was much beloved by rich and poor. As for Tim, he had his note-book out, and a greedy little pencil, ready to take down every word of the forthcoming conversation.

“Vaya usted con Dios Excelencia!” said the Padre, gravely. “I come from Acauhtzin—from Don Hypolito Xuarez, with a message to the Junta.”

“A message to the Junta from rebels, Reverend Father?”

“It is my duty to prevent this fratricidal war, if possible,” replied Ignatius, mildly. “I have spoken with Xuarez, and have persuaded him to send me hither with a message of peace.”

“And that message?”

“Cannot be spoken here, my son. Let us go to the Palacio Nacional!”

“By all means, my father. Will you not ride thither. One of my officers will give you his horse.”

Three or four of the officers at once dismounted, and begged Padre Ignatius to mount; but he refused their offers gently with a wave of his hand.

“No, my children. I will walk thither. Ride on, Excelencia I will be with you soon.”

“But *The Pizarro*, Padre!”

“Will lie off there till my message is delivered and the answer given. If the terms are accepted, one gun will be the sign; if refused, two guns, and the war-ship will return to the north.”

“Ah!” said Gomez, with a meaning smile, as he turned his horse’s head towards the gate, “they are afraid to trust themselves in the lion’s mouth.”

Chapter X

Padre Ignatius

With cross in hand, the pious father goes
From camp to camp on Heaven’s errand bent;
Soothing the wretched, overborne with woes,
And to the weary bringing sweet content.

Oh, gentle soul, too kind for this rude earth,
What virtues doth thy being comprehend;
Thou shouldst have lived in times of peaceful mirth,
When war was not, and man ne'er lacked a friend.

Of what avail those peaceful words of thine,
When for the battle armies are arrayed;
What use thy mission of good will divine,
When to the foe war's standard is displayed.

The drums are beaten, trumpets shrill resound,
Two gifts alone thou canst bestow on all;
Salute with smiles all those with honour crowned,
And for the dead a single tear let fall.

Tim was ubiquitous. He seemed neither to eat nor sleep, but, note-book in hand, followed the President about everywhere, with the idea of gathering material for his letters to *The Morning Planet*. From the Plaza de San Jago he had gone down to the sea gate of Tlatonac, where the meeting with Padre Ignatius took place, and from thence returned to the Palacio Nacional, at the heels of Gomez. In view of the message from Xuarez, the Junta had been hastily convened, and now the great hall of the palace was crowded with deputies waiting to hear the words of the Padre.

Owing to the influence of Don Miguel, which was supreme in Tlatonac, Jack and Philip were admitted to the meeting, and they, in company with Tim, who was present by virtue of his office, watched the scene with great interest. It is not every day that one has the chance of seeing the naked machinery of the Government. In this vast chamber was the motive force which kept the machine going. Now, the Governmental machine was out of order, and Padre Ignatius, as a moral engineer, was trying to put it right again. He advocated delicate handling of the suasive kind. Gomez, rough work, in the manner of blows, and brute strength. As to Xuarez—well, he was the wheel which had put the engine out of gear; and, until that wheel was forced back into its proper position, or taken out of the Cholacacan machine altogether, there was but little chance of the reversion to the old smooth running. This is a parable to illustrate the importance of that hastily convened meeting. Tim was the only one of the four friends who understood the matter thoroughly.

Don Francisco Gomez took his place in the Presidential chair, which stood beneath a gorgeous yellow satin canopy of anything but Republican simplicity. The opal arms of Cholacaca were above this drapery, the seat of power below; and therein sat President Gomez, with a fierce light in his eyes, and an ominous tightening of his lips. He was in a critical position, and he knew it. The ship of the Republic was among the breakers, and he, as helmsman, had to steer her into open sea again. With a disorderly crew, this was no easy task.

The members of the Junta took their seats in silence. They were like a class of schoolboys before their master, and, as Gomez cast his eyes over their ranks, he could pick out here and there the men whom he knew would be troublesome. To understand his difficulty, it is necessary to explain the exact position of politics in Cholacaca. Tim was doing this in a low, rapid voice to Philip, pending the appearance of Padre Ignatius. Jack listened to the explanation with interest, and every now and then threw in a word of enlightenment.

"As in England," said Tim, speaking in Philip's ear, "there are two political parties, broadly speaking. The Liberals and Conservatives. These, again, are sub-divided into smaller parties. On the Conservative side, there is the party now in power, the aristocratic party, who believe in electing one of their own order as President, and think the common people should have nothing to do with politics."

“That is the party of Don Miguel and the President?”

“Yes; their political programme is to govern on oligarchical principles. Cholocaca and its loaves and fishes, for the aristocrats only. That is one party. The other is the clericales, who would govern through the Church, and place the supreme power of the Republic in the hands of priests. Since the expulsion of the Jesuits, however, this party is defunct, and a good thing, too. I’m a true son of the Church,” added Tim, relapsing into his brogue; “but I don’t believe in the priests meddling with politics.”

“Then there is a third party,” said, Jack, taking up the explanation; “what we may term the Liberal-Conservative party, if such a thing be possible. They believe in aristocratic government, with the consent of the people. That is, the people can elect as President one of the aristocrats, but not one of themselves.”

“And what about the Liberals?” asked Philip, deeply interested.

“Oh, one party of the Liberals want democracy—pure unadulterated Republicanism. A second party desire military rule, which would be nothing more or less than despotism, supported by a standing army under the thumbs of a few martinets in power. Then there is a Free Lance party, where each individual desires the loaves and fishes for himself.”

“Then the party of Don Xuarez?”

“Is not here,” said Tim, waving his hand towards some empty seats; “they have all gone to Acauhtzin, and are now regarded as rebels by the Government. They desire a kind of civil despotism as opposed to the military party—a dictator with supreme power, who can act as he damn well please.”

“Seven political parties!” observed Cassim, derisively. “If too many cooks spoil the broth, too many political parties will certainly spoil Cholocaca. But they all seem to be afraid of one another. Don Xuarez has at least the courage of his opinions.”

“That is because his party is now strong enough to show fight. The others are all split up into small bodies, who quarrel among themselves and disagree with the President.”

“I presume they will all oppose Don Hypolito.”

“Naturally. They are dogs in the manger; they can’t get the supreme power of Cholocaca themselves, and won’t let Xuarez have it. I wonder what proposition the Padre brings from Acauhtzin.”

“Hush! here he is.”

Padre Ignatius, in his rusty black cassock, advanced, holding his shovel-hat clasped to his breast. Pausing in front of the President, where he could command the attention of all, he cast up his eyes to heaven, as if seeking for strength to sustain him in his difficult task of reconciling the factions which threatened to involve Cholocaca in civil war. With his pale, refined face, his silver locks, and tall, slender figure, he looked a remarkably striking personage, and put Philip in mind of a picture he had once seen of Las Casas, the great Indian missionary.

When he paused and thus sought inspiration in silent prayer, Gomez struck a silver bell on the desk before him. Instantly there was a dead silence, the murmur of voices was stilled, and every eye was turned towards the gentle priest.

“My children,” said Padre Ignatius, in a weak voice, which gathered strength as he proceeded, “some weeks ago I went to Acauhtzin on the business of our Holy Church. There I found Don Hypolito Xuarez,

who was not then in arms against the Junta. I knew, however, that he was a restless spirit, and, observing signs of dissatisfaction in the town, dreaded lest he should fan these embers of discontent into the flame of civil war. To Don Hypolito did I speak, but he disclaimed any intention of doing aught to break the peace of the Republic. In this, my children, he spoke falsely.”

A sullen murmur ran through the chamber.

“Noting these signs of discontent, I did not return to Tlatonac, but waited to see if aught should occur. Nothing took place till the arrival of the fleet to arrest Xuarez. Ah, my children, that was a fatal mistake. It roused him from discontented quietness into a state of open rebellion. He convened a meeting in the market-place of Acauhtzin, he told the populace he was to be arrested as a traitor, and called on them to stand by him in his peril. What promises he made use of I can hardly tell you, they were many and false; but those of the town believed him, and swore to assist his cause. The officers and crews of the fleet had already been tampered with by Xuarez before he left Tlatonac, and to a man they all went over on his side on hearing that Acauhtzin had done so.”

“Not all! Not all, my father,” cried Don Rafael, springing up from where he sat by Maraquando; “there are many who still remain faithful to the Junta—I among the number. We were cast into prison, and, by a miracle, I escaped, to bring the news to Tlatonac. I am free; but my friends—my faithful friends—are in the prison of Acauhtzin.”

Padre Ignatius looked sadly at the young man.

“They were faithful when you escaped,” he said, gently. “They were in prison my son; but now they are free, and have joined the rebels!”

“Carrajo!” swore Don Rafael, stamping with rage. “The traitors! the dogs! Canalla! I spit on them.”

“I call the Señor to order!” cried Gomez, for the sake of formality, though his sympathies were with those of the young man.

“I ask the pardon of His Excellency, and that of this Honourable Assembly,” replied Rafael, sitting down; “but my friends to be traitors! Por Dios! if I meet with them, I will show no mercy.”

“Reverend Father,” said the President, when the young man had resumed his seat, “all that you have said is the way in which Xuarez has revolted. Tell us of his message!”

“I went to Don Hypolito, when I heard these things,” said the Padre, slowly. “I went to him, Señores, and prayed him not to plunge the country into civil war. At first he refused to listen to me, saying he was strong enough to crush the Republic to the dust!”

“Carambo! Carrajo! Canalla!” cried a hundred voices, and many of the members sprang to their feet to speak. A Babel of voices ensued; but at length, by repeated ringing of his bell, the President secured silence for a few minutes, and Padre Ignatius went on with his speech.

“Don Hypolito said he had the aid of Acauhtzin; of the Regimiento de Huitzilopochtli, of the fleet, and, if needs be, could secure the help of the forest Indians!”

“The opal! The Chalchuih Tlatonac!”

“Yes!” cried the priest, emphatically; “by making use of that unholy stone! Xuarez is no true son of the Church, my children. He is a heretic, an idolater! He told me plainly that he worshipped and believed in

the opal of Huitzilopochtli, and would make use of the superstition it engendered among the Indians, to further his own ends.”

Another roar of wrath arose from the assemblage which the President was quite unable to quiet. Padre Ignatius lifted his thin hand in token of entreaty, and the tumult ceased.

“I need not say what he said to me, what I said to him; but I forced him to make an offer to the Junta, which, if accepted, will suspend all hostility. I implore you, Señores, to accept this offer, and avert this fratricidal war!”

“The offer! the message!”

“As you know, Señores, the Presidency is held for four years, and that he who has been our ruler cannot be re-elected! His Excellency, Don Francisco Gomez, has now held this honourable office for three years and a half. In six months it becomes vacant, and Don Hypolito Xuarez offers, if you make him President of Cholocaca, to return to his allegiance.”

“Never!” cried Maraquando, springing to his feet, amid a deafening cheering. “What! elect Xuarez for our President—place the supreme power in his hands? Give to ourselves a Dictator who will rob us of our liberties! Never! Never! Never!”

“No, Francia! No Iturbide! No, Santa Anna!” yelled the excited members. Gomez called the assemblage to order.

“Are these the only terms on which Xuarez will return to his allegiance?” he asked the priest.

“The only terms. If they are accepted, fire one gun, and *The Pizarro* will steam to Acauhtzin to tell Xuarez that the war will not take place. Two guns, and then, oh, my children, the vessel will go northward to bring desolation upon us. There will be war—red war; brother will be arrayed against brother; our towns will be laid in ashes; our peaceful community will struggle in deadly strife. I urge you, implore you, to accept this offer and avert disaster!”

“There will be war!” sang out some man in the crowd. “The opal is red!”

“The opal is red! the opal is red!”

“Are you Catholics?” cried Padre Ignatius, his voice ringing forth like a trumpet. “Are you sons of the Church or children of the devil? That stone is the work of Satan! Obey it, and you will bring ruin on yourselves, on your families, on your country. In the name of this sacred symbol,” he thundered, holding up the cross, “I command you to put this evil from your hearts. The devil stone speaks war the holy cross commands peace. Obey it at the peril of your souls—of your salvation. I say Peace! Peace! Peace! In the name of the Church—Peace! At your peril—War!”

The whole man was transfigured as he stood intrepidly facing the furious assemblage with the uplifted cross. There was no fear in his eyes, there was no trembling of the hand which upheld the symbol of Christianity. He was no longer Padre Ignatius, the gentle priest whom they knew. It was a priest, the representative of the awful power of Rome, with the thunders of the Vatican at his back, with salvation in this world, and in the next at his will, holding their souls in the hollow of his hand.

“Richelieu,” murmured Philip, softly.

For a moment the assemblage was awed. Many were atheists who believed in nothing; some idolaters, who trusted in the devil stone, all were superstitious, and they quailed before that frail old man who faced them so dauntlessly. Suddenly, as it were, the influence passed away, the devil-stone conquered the cross.

“War! War!” yelled the deputies, springing to their feet. “No priests! no Jesuits! To the vote! to the vote!”

Gomez arose to his feet.

“Señores,” he cried, loudly, “I respect the Padre for his effort to avert the war. His mission is to bring peace, and he has striven to do so. But it cannot be. The Cholocacan Republic cannot yield to the insolent demands of Xuarez. We choose our rulers freely, without coercion. In six months I surrender my office and will you permit Don Hypolito Xuarez, traitor and scoundrel, to profane this chair? No, Señores; a thousand times no! We know the nature of this man who aspires to play the part of a tyrant. Place him in this seat of power, and he will break every law of our glorious constitution. Will that liberty which was won by the blood of our fathers, by the heroism of Zuloaga, be trodden under foot at the bidding of this man? He comes, not to implore you to elect him supreme magistrate of the Republic. He comes with an army at his back, and commands you—I say commands you—to make him Dictator!”

“War! War! Down with Xuarez!”

“Who is this traitor, to dare our power? He has the fleet, it is true—traitors that they are!—but we have the army. We have money. We can buy a new fleet. Our soldiers shall break up his power. Let us hurl back in his face this insolent defiance, and sweep away Xuarez and his partisans in torrents of blood!”

“War! War! The opal burns red.”

“Yes, the opal burns red. And our hearts burn with indignation at the insolence of this man. I swear,” cried the President, drawing his sword. “I swear, by my sword, by the Chalchuih Tlatonac, that I shall not sheath this weapon till it has exterminated these traitors, and purified the Republic. Hear me, God!”

“Hear us, God!” And a myriad swords flashed in the air.

“Will I put the offer of the traitor Xuarez to the vote?”

“No, no! War! war!”

Ignatius tried to speak, but he saw that the Junta was unanimous in proclaiming war. His cross fell from his nerveless hands; his head sunk on his breast.

“Holy Mary, have mercy on these misguided men.”

He passed out of the hall in dejected silence, and after him swept a whirlwind of men, headed by the President. Outside the Palacio Nacional, a crowd of people were waiting to hear the decision of the Junta. Standing on the marble steps of the palace, Don Francisco caused the standard of the Republic to be unfurled, and waved his bare sword in the air.

“In the name of the Junta! In the name of the free people of the great Republic of Cholocaca, I proclaim war against the traitor Xuarez!”

“War! war! war!” yelled the mob, frantically. “The opal burns red! War! war!”

Then, with one accord, the rabble dashed down to the sea-gate of the city.

“What are they going there for, Tim?” asked Philip, as they were borne along by the living torrent.

“To hear the cannon answer Xuarez, if I mistake not. Holy Virgin! what devils these are when their blood is up!”

From the Plaza de los Hombres Ilustres the crowd rolled down the steep of the Calle Otumba, passed into the Calle Mayor, and in a few minutes the city was vomiting hundreds of infuriated men out of her gates on to the beach and wharf.

Far away on the azure sea lay the vast bulk of *The Pizarro*, with the flag of the Republic floating at her main-mast, in conjunction with the white pennant of peace. The crowd held their breath, and throughout the vast assemblage there was not a sound. The waves lapping on the beach could alone be heard, and each man in that mighty congregation held his breath.

“One gun for ‘yes!’ Two guns for ‘no!’ ” muttered Jack, in Tim’s ear.

At that instant a puff of smoke broke from an embrasure of the rear fort, and a gun thundered out its defiance to Xuarez. In another minute, before the echo of the first died away, a second gun from the other fort roared out in the still air, and there was an answering roar from the crowd below.

The flag of peace! the flag of the opal were suddenly lowered from the mast of *The Pizarro*, and up went a fierce red banner, foretelling war and disaster. The mob yelled with rage, the guns of *The Pizarro* sent forth an insolent defiance, and in a few minutes, with the smoke pouring black and thick from her funnels, the great vessel stood out to sea.

The War of Cholocaca had commenced.

Chapter XI

The Drama Of Little Things

Many things happen!

They are the daily events of our lives, we note them with idle indifference.

The lover kisses his dear one, she sighs on his throbbing bosom,

He springs on his waiting horse, and waving his hand at parting,

Thinks that the morrow for certain, will bring her again to his kisses,

Alas! he knows not that Fate is capricious!

That never again will the dear one respond to his welcome caresses!

“Good-bye for an hour!” ah, sorrow. That good-bye means “farewell for ever.”

And yet they know not this future, and so, parting happy,

Go east and west gladly, to anguish apart till they perish.

“Quiere a fumar, Juan,” said Dolores, holding out a small case to Jack, with a coquettish smile.

“Campeacheanos!” replied her lover, selecting one carefully, “these are for men only. I hope you don’t smoke these, mi cara.”

“No! I but use cigarros de papel. This case belongs to my cousin, Don Rafael. Now it is yours.”

“What will Don Rafael say?”

“Say! Why, nothing, of course. He made me a present of the campeacheanos.”

“Oh, did he?” exclaimed Jack, suspiciously. “You seem to be fond of your cousin, Dolores!”

“Naturally! It is my duty,” replied Dolores, demurely, and dropped her eyes.

“Oh!” said Duval, briefly, and busied himself in lighting a cigarette.

It was late in the afternoon, and they were on the azotea of Maraquando’s house alone, save for the presence of Doña Serafina; but she was asleep, and, therefore, did not trouble them. As before stated, the Casa Maraquando was on the summit of the hill, and from the roof they could look down into the valley below. Ring after ring of houses encompassed the rise, and on the flat, trending towards the sea, street, and house, and plaza, and wall, were laid out as in a map. To the left, the vast space of the parade-ground; to the right, the crowded quarter of the peons, a mass of huddled huts, red-roofed, white-walled, and between the two the broad street leading from the foot of the hill down to the sea-gate.

On the parade-ground companies of soldiers were manœuvring. Here and there the bright colours of uniforms could be seen in the streets. Sometimes a distant trumpet rang out shrilly, or the muffled thunder of drums came faintly to their ears. Within the walls of the city all was bustle and military pomp, the place was one vast camp. Beyond, the white line of the walls and the infinite stretch of azure sea glittering in the sunshine.

Peter, in company with Cocom, had gone outside the inland walls for a final butterfly hunt before the outbreak of war, when, in view of the suburbs being deserted, he would have to abandon his favourite pursuit. Down in the Plaza de San Jago, Sir Philip Cassim was assisting Don Rafael to drill his men, and Tim was, as usual, haunting the telegraph-office and the Palacio Nacional. He spent all his time between these two places, collecting news, and despatching messages. Only Jack was idle; Jack, who, decked out in the gaudy uniform of the Regimiento de los Caballeros, set on the azotea flirting with Dolores and smoking innumerable cigarettes. With masculine vanity, he had come there especially to show himself to the lady of his heart, in his new uniform, and, finding Doña Serafina asleep, had waited to speak to Dolores for a few minutes before joining Philip in the plaza below. The few minutes had, by this time, lengthened into half-an-hour.

Without doubt Jack looked remarkably handsome in his uniform, and Dolores acknowledged this to herself as she glanced at him from behind the safe shelter of her fan. He was as fine as a humming-bird, and tinted like a rainbow. The Mexican dress became him admirably, and in that brilliant climate the bright colours did not look too pronounced.

The uniform consisted of calzoneros of dark green velvet split from the thigh downward, slashed with braid, set with rows of silver buttons, and filled with the calzoncillos of white muslin. A short, tight-fitting jacket of yellow cloth embroidered with gold, over a full white shirt, puffing out at the hips, open sleeves, a scarlet-silk sash round the waist sustaining a brace of pistols and a Spanish knife. Finally, boots of tanned leather with heavy spurs hanging with little bells. Over all his finery, Jack wore a picturesque zarape of dark blue, and a sombrero of the same colour encircled with a broad band of gold. In this picturesque costume, his fine figure was seen to its best advantage; but Jack was already regretting his plain English riding-suit of unadorned grey.

At present, however, he was not thinking of his fine feathers, or of the two men waiting for him in the Plaza de San Jago, but of the last remark of Dolores.

Jack had no reason to be jealous of Don Rafael, as he, to all appearances, cared more for war than for women; yet, because Dolores admitted that she liked her cousin, this foolish young man began to sulk. The girl watched him with great amusement for a few minutes, and then made a malicious remark in reference to his uniform.

“Pajaro precoso!”

“Oh, I am a precious bird, am I?” said Jack, ungraciously; “but not precious to you, Dolores. Don Rafael—”

“Is my cousin—nothing more.”

“I don’t like cousins,” muttered Duval, obstinately, keeping his eyes away from her face, whereat Dolores rapped him smartly on the fingers with her closed fan.

“I will eat all the cousins of your killing, Juan. Turn your face to me, child that you are. Santissima! What a cross face! Señor Caballero, you are jealous!”

“Yes,” admitted Jack, reluctantly.

Dolores glanced at her aunt, to make sure that she was asleep, then bending towards this foolish lover, kissed him on the cheek.

“Are you jealous now, querido?”

“No,” answered Jack, returning the kiss with interest; “I am a fool not to trust you thoroughly.”

“You are! Hush! Enough! My aunt may awake.”

“Not she! So you love me only, Dolores? And Don Rafael—”

“Is betrothed to a lady of Acauhtzin.”

“Oh, Dolores!” sighed Jack, much relieved, and kissed her again. In fact, he would have saluted her several times, had not Dolores spread her fan between their two faces as a shield.

“No, no! Doña Serafina may awaken, and then—’Dios de mi alma,’ what would my uncle say?”

“He must know sooner or later.”

“Wait till the war is over, querido. Till Don Hypolito is slain, and you return covered with glory. Then my uncle can refuse you nothing.”

“Bueno! I will wait. And, after all, Dolores, I am not quite a foreigner. I have dwelt so long in Mexico that I know all your manners and customs. Now I have even assumed the dress of Cholocaca, so I am quite one of your own people.”

“And a heretic!”

“Ah! Padre Ignatius has been talking to you?”

“No, querido; my aunt—”

“Oh, never mind your aunt. If I mistake not, she admires a heretic herself.”

“El hombrecillo!”

"If by the little man you mean Don Pedro, yes. But oh, my soul, do not let such things as this separate us. You love me, Dolores? You will be true to me?"

"I swear it!" cried the girl, throwing herself on his breast; "I swear it—by the opal!"

"No, no! not that. You surely don't believe in the devil stone?"

"Am I a child to believe?" laughed Dolores, scornfully. "No; I am a true daughter of the Church; but I believe this opal to be mine, and if I can get it I will do so."

"We will both try and obtain it, though I am afraid there is but little chance of doing so. We know not where is the temple."

"Cocom knows."

"Yes; but Cocom will not tell. But enough of the opal. We will talk of it again. Meanwhile, tell me to whom is Rafael engaged? He has told me nothing about it."

"No; he has told no one save me, lest it should reach the ears of my uncle, and thus anger him. The lady my cousin loves is Doña Carmencita de Tejada—"

"What!" ejaculated Jack, in surprise. "The daughter of Xuarez's right-hand man?"

"Yes, the daughter of Don José de Tejada, the rebel. So, you see, he does not let his father know of his love, for Don Miguel would never consent to his son becoming the husband of a traitor's child."

"True, true. Poor Rafael! The course of his love does not seem likely to run smooth. Still, when the war is over, he may be more fortunate."

"Ah! the war," said Doña Dolores, sadly. "This terrible war. How I tremble to think of what is before us. Should Don Hypolito conquer—" She covered her face with her hands, shuddering violently.

"Don Hypolito will not conquer," replied Jack, soothingly taking her to his breast. "We will humble him to the dust before three months are ended. Besides, if the worst comes, we can fly to Europe."

"Ay, de mi. May it not come to that."

"Amen!" said Duval, solemnly; and they remained clasped in each others arms, with hearts too full for speech.

Suddenly they heard the sound of a prolonged yawn, and had just time to separate before Doña Serafina caught them in that close embrace. Fortunately, they had been hidden by an angle of the azotea wall, so the good lady, who had just awakened, and was still bemused with sleep, saw nothing. When she was thoroughly awake, however, she espied Jack in all the bravery of his uniform, and came forward with a light step and an exclamation of delight.

"El Regimiento de los Caballeros!" she exclaimed, admiringly. "Santissima! how the uniform does become you, Don Juan. I do so admire handsome Americanos," added the lady, languidly. Dolores laughed at this naïve confession, but Jack, modest Jack, blushed through the tan of his skin.

"Really, Doña Serafina, I am much obliged, I kiss your hands," he answered, confusedly. "I have just arrived"—he had been there half an hour—"just arrived, Señora, and I had not the heart to disturb you."

“Has the child spoken?” said Doña Serafina, waving her fan towards Dolores, who stood with downcast eyes, inwardly convulsed, outwardly demure.

“Oh yes; a little. She has not the brilliant tongue of her aunt,” replied Jack, artfully.

“Pobrecita! She is young; she is a kitten. She will yet improve. I was the same at her age.”

“The deuce you were,” thought Jack, with secret apprehension, surveying her portly form. “I hope Dolores won’t be the same at your age.”

“And Don Pedro?” asked the duenna, languidly.

“Will lay his heart at your feet this evening, Señora.”

“It is his Don Juan,” responded the lady, graciously. It was a mere figure of speech; but Jack was secretly amused to think how alarmed Peter would be hearing of such an offer.

“Oh, this war, Señor Americano; this terrible war! How I fear it.”

“Do not be afraid, Señora. We will protect you.”

“Oh yes; I am sure of that. But my nephew, Señor? Don Rafael! He is much angered.”

“At the war?”

“Santissima, no! At his ship, which still sails up and down in front of Tlatonac. What does it mean, Señor?”

Jack turned in the direction indicated by her fan, and saw a large ship far out on the wrinkled sea.

“Is that *The Pizarro*? I did not know,” he said in some perplexity. “I understood she had departed to Acauhtzin.”

“My cousin says it is *The Pizarro*,” interposed Dolores at this moment; “and we know not why she stays.”

“I notice she keeps well out of the range of the fort guns,” muttered Jack, anxiously. “Hum! it is curious. Perhaps she is sent by Don Hypolito to carry off Doña Dolores.”

The old lady made a gesture to avert the evil eye.

“Say not such things, Señor. That terrible man! He might carry me off even here.”

“So he might, Señora,” replied Jack, trying to be serious. “I would advise yourself and the young ladies to keep within doors.”

“If Don Hypolito can carry us off from the middle of Tlatonac, he is cleverer than I think,” said Dolores, contemptuously; “but what can be the reason of *The Pizarro* thus guarding the town?”

“I have it!” cried Jack, suddenly enlightened. “She is watching for the arrival of the torpedo-boats. Yes, that is her game. She wishes to meet them before they know of the revolt, and thus seduce them to the cause of Xuarez!”

“Impossible, Señor!” exclaimed both ladies at once.

“It is true! I am sure of it,” responded Jack, hurriedly. “I must speak to Don Rafael about this. ‘Adios, señoritas! Con Dios vayan ustedes.’ ”

The young engineer kissed the hands of both ladies, and clattered down the steps on his way to the patio. Just as he was passing through the zaguan, he heard a light foot hasten after him, and before he reached the door, Dolores was in his arms.

“I left my aunt on the azotea,” she said, breathlessly. “One kiss, querido, before you go! There;—and there! Oh, my soul! Be careful of yourself. I go, at vespers, to pray for you at the shrine of our Lady.”

“Angel! Such prayers will be my safeguard in all dangers!”

“Padre Ignatius has promised me a sacred relic which preserves the wearer from harm. He gives it to me this evening. I will bring it to you. To-night you will be here?”

“Yes, at the eighth hour. Adios, angelito!”

They embraced hurriedly, and Dolores returned to the azotea to explain her sudden absence to Doña Serafina as best she could; while Jack, filled with joy at these proofs of her love, gaily danced down the street on his way to the Plaza de San Jago, where Philip waited him.

Everywhere soldiers, everywhere the beating of drums, the shrilling of trumpets, the waving of flags, and oftentimes the martial strains of the “Opal Fandango.” The city of Tlatonac had awakened from its sleep of years, and in every street, in every house, activity prevailed. It was not a city; it was a camp. The inhabitants, almost to a man, had become soldiers, and flattered by the women, dressed in gaudy uniforms, excited by frequent draughts of aguardiente, they fancied themselves invincible. Every evening fireworks were let off in the principal squares, bands of soldiers marched nightly through the streets, singing the national song of the opal; and at times the enthusiasm arose to such a pitch that the whole city was convulsed with a delirium of joy. In the opinion of Tlatonac, the rebel Xuarez was already conquered.

“I hope this enthusiasm is not born of Dutch courage,” said Jack to himself, as he elbowed his way through an excited throng; “but it seems too violent to last. These howling wretches see Xuarez in chains, pleading for his life; but they don’t see the events which are bound to occur before such a thing takes place.”

“Abajo los Oposidores! Viva el Republica! Mueran a Xuarez!”

“Shout away, mis amigos,” muttered Duval, grimly; “we’ll see if you’ll shout as loudly when the bombs are cracking over the city. If *The Pizarro* sent one now, I guess you’d not be so lively.”

In the Plaza de San Jago, soldiers were being drilled. A fine body of men was El Regimiento de los Caballeros, and a gallant show they made as they wheeled their horses into line. Philip, arrayed in the same style as Jack, was reining his steed beside Colonel Garibay, the commander of the troop, and on the other side of him rode Don Rafael, late a captain in the navy, now a captain on land. Don Rafael, a handsome, dark-eyed young man, full of fiery earnestness, and not unlike his sister in appearance, though lacking her softer feminine grace, had taken a great fancy to Philip, with whom he had become very intimate. Jack Duval he knew of old, and liked immensely; but Cassim’s character was more in accordance with his own, therefore they were comrades by the rule of like drawing to like.

Colonel Garibay was greatly gratified that these two young Americanos had joined his troop as volunteers, and made things as pleasant for them as he possibly could. He commanded one of the crack regiments of the Cholocacan army, and was determined that it should not belie its reputation in the coming war. Hitherto it had but reaped laurels in frontier wars against the Indians; but now it was for the first time to combat with a civilised foe, and would have a good opportunity of showing to the world of what stuff its men were made.

The regiment deployed into thin lines, massed into compact columns, charged at the gallop, retired in good order, and proved themselves in all the complicated evolutions of a cavalry corps to be thoroughly disciplined soldiers. In the burning sun, with the grey dust whirling up in clouds from the restless feet of the horses, the columns expanded and contracted like the glittering lengths of a snake, and at every sound of the bugle the lines changed their position with the utmost military precision. For three hours Garibay kept his troop hard at work. At length even his insatiable soul was satisfied at their state of efficiency, and to the stirring strains of the “Zuloaga March” the men filed off the ground.

In other parts of the plaza infantry regiments were drilling and, after a time, these also dispersed, so that by the hour of sundown the great square was almost deserted, save for scattered groups of soldiers discussing the coming war. Jack, in company with Philip and the Colonel, went off to the quarters of the latter in the sea-fort, and there they proceeded to make themselves comfortable.

“I am pleased with my children, Señores,” said Garibay, thoughtfully; “but I would I commanded foot instead of horse.”

“Wherefore so, Don Rodrigo?”

“For this reason, Señor Felipe. Our country is so mountainous that, save on the plains, there is but little use for cavalry. The seat of the war will be at Acauhtzin, and there the land is all mountains. Consequently the infantry will be of most service up yonder. If, however, the enemy come south to Tlatonac and Janjalla, our cavalry can meet them in the open plains surrounding these towns.”

“Don Hypolito will certainly come south,” said Jack, sagely. “He will not wait for the Republic to send troops up to Acauhtzin, but embark his troops on the war-ships, and try his fortunes down in this direction. Besides, Xuarez knows that the Republic has no transports for the troops.”

“No war-ships, Señor,” replied the Colonel, gravely, “that is true. But by order of his Excellency, all merchant-vessels of a certain tonnage have been seized in the port of Tlatonac, and requisitioned for the service of transporting troops to Acauhtzin.”

“The deuce! And what say the owners to such high-handed proceedings?”

“The owners have been paid. So, you see, we can embark our men on these ships, and sail north to—”

“To be knocked to pieces by the war-ships,” finished Philip, coolly.

“Señor, you forget the torpederas will be here soon.”

“That is if *The Pizarro* will let them pass her,” said Duval, meaningly. “I see she is cruising constantly up and down.”

“Do you think, Don Juan, she is waiting for the arrival of the torpederas?” asked the Colonel, anxiously.

"I am sure of it, Colonel. Don Miguel informed me that the torpedo-boats had started from England. Xuarez, who has his spies in England, also knows this, and sent *The Pizarro* south with a twofold object: to dictate terms to the Republic, and intercept the torpederas."

"He failed in the first, however," observed Philip, hopefully.

"True! but he may not fail in the second."

"One moment, Señores," said the Colonel, earnestly, "*The Pizarro* dare not stop the torpedo-boats—they could sink her in no time. She has no defence against them—no nets, for those were left at Tlatonac when the fleet went north."

"All the more reason that Xuarez should capture the torpedo-boats," retorted Jack, hotly. "*The Pizarro* will not try force, mi Colonel! No; the torpederas left England before war was proclaimed; therefore, those in charge know nothing of the disaffection of the fleet, of the rebellion of Xuarez. If they meet *The Pizarro*, they will stop when she signals; their commanders will go on board in blissful ignorance, and be either seduced to the cause of Xuarez, or retained as prisoners of war. In either case, the torpederas, taken by surprise, will be captured, and accompany *The Pizarro* to the north."

"True! What you say is true, Señor! Santissima! What ill-fortune!"

"The torpederas must be warned!" exclaimed Philip, quickly. "I will speak to His Excellency, and offer the services of my yacht to the Republic. If my offer is accepted, I will get steam up on *The Bohemian*, and stand out to sea at once. Cruise up and down till I see the torpederas, and then warn them of their danger."

"Yes, and be chased all the time by *The Pizarro*."

"She can't catch *The Bohemian*. I'd back my boat against the combined speed of the whole rebel navy. It is the only chance of saving the torpedo-boats from the clutches of Xuarez."

"What a pity my railway is not finished," said Jack, regretfully; "then we could have ran up the whole army to Acauhtzin without trouble. As it is, the only passage is by sea, and I am afraid the war-ships render that impossible."

"How far have you got with the line, Jack?"

"Only fifty miles. It stops in the centre of a dense forest, so it is worse than useless—to Xuarez as to ourselves."

At this moment Don Rafael entered, in a state of great excitement.

"Ola, Señores," he said, gaily; "I have just come from the presence of His Excellency and my father; it is the intention of the Junta to send an embassy to Acauhtzin."

"To treat with Xuarez?"

"Carajo! no!" retorted the young man fiercely; "to promise freedom to the rebels, if they lay down their arms and deliver up Xuarez for punishment."

Colonel Garibay shook his head.

“They won’t do that, mi amigo! if I know anything of Don Hypolito.”

“It is true that he has great influence over them,” said Rafael, thoughtfully; “but the power of the Oposidores is as nothing before that of the Junta; if they are wise, they will lay down their arms.”

“They are not wise, however,” said Jack, dryly; “and they won’t lay down their arms. And how does the embassy propose to get to Acauhtzin?”

“It is said that Señor Felipe has offered his ship to the Junta,” said Rafael, bowing courteously to the baronet; “and the Junta have decided to accept that grand offer with a thousand thanks.”

“Bueno!” cried Philip, heartily. “I am glad *The Bohemian* will be of some service. Yes, Don Rafael, my yacht is at the disposal of the Government. But tell me, Señor, who goes north with the embassy?”

“Yourself, Señor Felipe, if you will come; my father and myself, with a company of soldiers.”

“Why yourself, Don Rafael?”

The young hidalgo blushed, and rolled a cigarette with pretended indifference.

“I! Oh, I wish to hurl defiance in the teeth of Xuarez.”

Philip had received a hint of Don Rafael’s passion and as Jack was busily talking with Garibay, approached the captain with a smile.

“Is that all?” he whispered, smiling.

Don Rafael looked at him steadily, and then caught his hand with a sudden passion of friendship.

“No, mi amigo. I wish to see Doña Carmencita, and, if possible, carry her south.”

“Will she come, Rafael?”

“Yes, she loves me; her father is cruel to her; she will come, if you will permit it.”

“Señor, my ship and all I have is at your disposal.”

“A thousand thanks, Don Felipe,” said Rafael, cordially pressing his friend’s hand; “I will take advantage of your kindness. Not a word to my father, Señor. He knows nothing as yet; I will tell him all at Acauhtzin.”

“I will be silent.”

“Gracias mi amigo. I will give you my help in the like case.”

“It will certainly be needed some day,” replied Philip, significantly.

“But not as yet. Ah, Señor, you do not then know what it is to love.”

“Don’t I?” thought Philip, and saw before him, as in a dream, the fair face of Doña Eulalia.

It was now late, so, after they had dined with Garibay, the two Englishmen, at the invitation of Don Rafael, went to the Casa Maraquando.

When they arrived, to their surprise, all was in confusion. The servants were running aimlessly about, Doña Serafina and Eulalia were in tears, and Don Miguel was cursing loud and deep.

“What is the matter?” asked the young men in alarm.

“Dolores is lost!”

Chapter XII

A Strange Disappearance

Shepherds kind! my love hath left me,
Therefore am I filled with woe;
Of my heart hath she bereft me;
Thievish nymph! why didst thou so?
Ah, well-a-day! True love is a jewel!
Why hence away? Oh, my Chloe cruel.
Tell the damsel, should ye meet her,
That, alas! no heart have I,
For her love I would entreat her;
Fickle maid, why didst thou fly?
Ah, well-a-day! True love is a jewel!
Why hence away? Oh, my Chloe cruel.
Prythee shepherds, her discover,
I her face again would see;
Still am I her longing lover;
Sweet coquette, return to me!
Ah, well-a-day! True love is a jewel!
Why hence away? Oh, my Chloe cruel.

Dolores lost! Jack's thoughts immediately became busy with Don Hypolito, and the Forest Indians. Could it be that she had been carried off by one of these, and if so, by which of the two? It was now nine o'clock, and Jack had left her on the roof of the azotea at four. It seemed impossible that in so short a period the girl could have utterly disappeared. At the same time, by the strict social observances of Tlatonac, Dolores should have returned from her visit to the cathedral before dark, and as she had not done so, there seemed to be reasonable ground for apprehension.

Such excitement reigned in the house that it was some time before either Jack or Philip could extract the reasons for such belief from the alarmed inmates. As poor Duval was terribly upset at the thought that Dolores was lost, Philip took affairs into his own hands with great promptitude, and proceeded to cross-examine the maid who had last seen her. This damsel, by name Marina, was of pure Indian extraction, and cunning past all knowing. At the present time, however, owing to the reproaches of Doña Serafina, and the scoldings of Don Miguel, she was reduced to a kind of moral pulp, not having even sufficient energy to lie according to custom.

Philip spoke to Don Miguel as to the advisability of extracting information from this girl; and at once Marina was brought before him. She was terribly afraid of the Señor Americano, who looked so stern and evidently thought Philip was about to order her immediate execution.

“Marina!” asked Philip, slowly, in Spanish, “where did you last see the Señorita?”

“Santissima! Señor Americano!” replied the frightened poblana, clasping her hands, “it was in the great church. The Señorita was kneeling at the shrine of Our Lady, and—and—”

“Go on,” said Philip, seeing she hesitated.

“Por Dios, Señor, I thought no harm; but I saw Pepe at the door of the church, and he beckoned to me.”

“Who is Pepe?”

“Hechicera!” broke in Doña Serafina, wildly, “that good-for-nothing Pepe is your lover. And you went to him, ladroncilla? Eh, yes! You left the Señorita. Oh, wicked one! Oh, child of Satan!”

“But for a moment, I swear! Por todos santos! it was not long. When I returned to the shrine, Doña Dolores was gone. I thought she had departed to see Padre Ignatius, and I waited. A long time I waited, Señor Americano, but she came not. Then I believed she had returned to the casa, and I was afraid of being punished, so I did not come back here till late! She is not here! ay de mi! and I know not where is the poor angel! Madre de Dios! what misfortune!”

There was nothing more to be got out of the terrified girl, as she but repeated this story over and over again. She had gone with Dolores to the cathedral, had spoken to Pepe, and then lost sight of her mistress. Inquiries were made for Pepe, who was a zambo, that is, the offspring of an Indian and an African. To all accounts, he inherited the worst vices of both races, and was an idle, drunken vagabond, who had been frequently punished by Don Miguel for thieving. It was possible that, out of revenge, the zambo might have decoyed Dolores beyond the walls, and there surrendered her to the Indians. Maraquando thought that this might be the case.

“No!” said Jack, when this explanation was suggested, “Dolores was afraid of the Indians, and would not believe any message brought by such a man. But she told me to-day that she wished to see Padre Ignatius. Perhaps he was not in the cathedral, and she went to his chapel beyond the walls. Once there, and all things are possible.”

“It might be so,” cried Don Miguel, sadly. “I have sent out men to ride everywhere beyond the walls, and try to discover traces. They will certainly go to the chapel, and ask the Padre if my poor child has been there!”

“Ay di mi! what sorrow,” cried Eulalia, whose pretty face was disfigured by tears; “if Dolores is with the Indians, they will sacrifice her to the Chalchuih Tlatonac.”

“Not so, hermanita!” cried Rafael, hastily, “she is the guardian of the opal! They would not dare to do this! If she is with the Indians, her life is safe. But Don Hypolito!”

“Carrai!” exclaimed his father, fiercely, “what of that false one?”

“He swore to carry off Dolores, and make her his wife. This demonio of a Pepe was once in the household of Xuarez. He may be in his pay now, and have decoyed my cousin down to the sea-beach, beyond the gate.”

“But how could he take her from thence?” asked Philip, in perplexity.

“Carrambo, Señor! do you forget that *The Pizarro* has been cruising before Tlatonac for days past. It was not to watch the torpederas coming, as we thought. By San Jago, it was to capture and carry off Dolores.”

“That cannot be!” said Jack, in despair. “*The Pizarro* would not dare to come under the guns of the fort!”

“She could do so in the darkness.”

“But the search lights.”

“They are at present useless,” cried Don Miguel striking his breast with his hand; “the electric apparatus is out of repair, and the engineers are now attending to it. What misfortune! Dios! It may be as Rafael says. Pepe decoyed Dolores to the beach, and from thence she could be taken to the war-ship.”

Jack was horrified at this possibility. It was not very probable that such a thing had happened; still, it might have taken place. If it were so, Dolores would be now on board *The Pizarro*, steaming north to Acaultzin—to Xuarez, whom she hated and feared. He was about to speak his mind on the subject when Tim, in a great flurry, arrived with Peter.

“What is all this about?” cried Tim, rushing up to Jack. “Is Doña Dolores missing?”

Philip drew him away from Jack, who was too overwhelmed to answer questions, and hurriedly explained all that had occurred. The Irishman scratched his head, but could suggest nothing save that they should search the country. A sudden idea struck Philip.

“Peter!” he said quickly, turning towards the doctor, “what time did you return from your beetle hunting?”

“About sunset.”

“And Cocom?”

“Left me as soon as we entered the town, in order to pray at the cathedral. He has done the same thing regularly every time we have returned to Tlatonac.”

“Cocom!” cried Jack, jumping to his feet at the mention of the name, “why, Philip, do you think he decoyed Dolores away?”

“Who knows! She is either with the Indians or with Xuarez. Cocom or Pepe, as emissaries of Don Hypolito, may have carried her off.”

The foregoing had been spoken in English, and, ignorant of the language, Rafael could only understand the names. He glanced eagerly from one to the other, and spoke quickly.

“Cocom! Pepe! What is this, Señor Felipe?”

Whereat Philip began to explain, but was interrupted by the entrance of Padre Ignatius. The good priest looked much disturbed, and raised his hand to bless those in the room. Doña Serafina and Eulalia flung themselves at his feet, and were so overwhelmed with grief that they had to be taken away. When they had gone, Padre Ignatius turned to the men.

“My sons, I hear evil news. Is it true that Doña Dolores is missing?”

“Yes; do you know where she is?” asked Jack, imploringly, laying his hand on the rusty sleeve of the priest.

“Alas! no,” replied the Padre, shaking his head; “all the afternoon did I wait for her in the cathedral, but she came not!”

“She did not go to your own church, my father?” questioned Rafael, eagerly.

“No, my son. I thought she might have done so, and repaired thither. But the sacristan tells me no one has been to the shrine this day. The messengers you sent out to seek for the poor lady came to the chapel to ask me if I had seen her, and it was then that I first heard of your great loss.”

“Think you the Indians have her?” asked Philip, anxiously.

“Alas! who knows, Señor? The idolaters have been worshipping the devil stone greatly of late, and it may be that they have carried off Doña Dolores to assist in the ceremonies.”

“Not to sacrifice her?”

“Santissima Virgen! no, Señor,” rejoined the Padre, hastily. “The idolaters look on her as the guardian of the stone, as one under the protection of the god himself. If they have carried her off,” added the priest, emphatically, “her life is safe, and her honour. But my son, Don Hypolito?”

“Do you think—?”

“I know nothing, my son. But there is one Pepe.”

“The zambo? Yes, Padre.”

“He hired a boat this afternoon from one of the fishers, saying he was about to go up the coast to see his mother. I heard of that by chance, my children. When it was told to me that Pepe had been seen hanging about the doors of the cathedral, I went from my chapel to the sea-port at once, and there I find that the boat and Pepe are both gone.”

“Carajo!” swore Rafael, giving voice to the general opinion, “he has carried Dolores off to *The Pizarro*. Ladron!”

“It may not be so,” said Philip, thoughtfully; “Cocom is also missing. Doña Dolores may have gone with him.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Peter, angrily. “Cocom is a good fellow, and devoted to Doña Dolores. He would not harm a hair of her head.”

“It’s a queer business,” cried Tim, in perplexity; “‘tis either Cocom or Pepe. I am certain it is the last of them. *The Pizarro* wasn’t cruising up and down for nothing.”

“The torpedo-boats—”

“To the devil with them! Hasn’t Xuarez his spies in England as well as the Junta? He knows the torpedo-boats are not due here for at least a fortnight, so why should he waste time in searching for them now? By all the saints,” shouted Tim, raising his enormous fist, and crashing it down on the table, “‘tis Don Hypolito who has the poor girl.”

There was nothing more to be said in the matter as the opinions of everyone were divided. Don Rafael, Philip, and Peter believed that Dolores had been carried off by Don Hypolito, as also did Padre Ignatius; while Don Miguel, Tim, and Jack were equally confident that she was in the power of the forest Indians. The Englishmen went back to their house, and, as nothing could be done till morning, Philip spent most of the night trying to comfort Jack, who refused to go to bed, and walked up and down the sitting-room till close on dawn. At last the baronet persuaded him to lie down and have some rest, but he only slept fitfully. At dawn he was on his feet again, and away to the house of Maraquando, to hear if any news had arrived concerning Dolores.

“My poor Jack, you will kill yourself,” said Philip anxiously looking at the young man’s haggard face.

“No I won’t,” retorted Jack, grimly, “I’ll hold out until I find Dolores. And find her I will, whether she is in that d—d temple, or with the cursed Don Hypolito.”

“If she is with Don Hypolito,” said Philip, as he hurried along beside his friend, “we can go up to Acauhtzin in my yacht, and demand her to be given up; but if the Indians have her, I am afraid we shall never see her. No one knows where the temple is.”

“I don’t care if it is in the moon,” cried Duval, doggedly. “I’ll hunt those infernal Indians out and make them pay for this. Of two evils I choose the least, and I trust and believe she is with those opal-stone fanatics rather than at Acauhtzin.”

“Don Hypolito—”

“He is a devil!” rejoined Jack, fiercely. “If she is with him, God help her! And God help him!” added the young man, in a low voice of concentrated hatred, “if I get my fingers on his throat.”

Philip heartily endorsed this opinion; but, afraid of adding to Jack’s worry, kept his thoughts to himself. They speedily arrived at Casa Maraquando, and found Rafael on the azotea, looking seaward with a marine telescope. He turned round sharply as he heard their footsteps, and pointed due east.

“She is gone,” he said, with a gesture of despair.

“Dolores?” said Jack, whose brain only held one idea.

“Yes; and *The Pizarro*!”

“In that case, I am afraid Doña Dolores has been carried off by Don Hypolito,” observed Philip, taking the glass from Rafael. “No doubt that cursed zambo induced her to go down to the sea-gate on some pretext, and then took her off to the war-ship, which stood in to land under cover of darkness.”

“Have you heard anything?” asked Jack, paying no attention to this speech, but turning to Don Rafael.

“Of Dolores, nothing. All the messengers sent out have returned without tidings. It is stated that the Chalchuih Tlatonac is burning red, and thus proclaiming war. To propitiate the god, some great feast is to take place; but whether Dolores has been seized by the Indians and carried to their temple to assist at the ceremony I do not know. Not a single trace of her can be found.”

“And Cocom?”

“Cocom has disappeared—so has Pepe and Marina?”

“Marina?” cried Jack, starting.

“Yes; but that is not the worst. My father, as a member of the Junta, had plans of the fortifications to Tlatonac. These have been stolen—”

“Stolen?” interrupted Philip, who had been vainly sweeping the horizon in search of *The Pizarro*; “and by Marina.”

“So my father thinks. My belief of last night is true, Señores. That ladron Pepe is a spy in the service of Hypolito. He seduced Marina into stealing the plans from my father’s room, and now they have gone off together in that boat to *The Pizarro*.”

“Impossible, Rafael,” replied Cassim, decisively. “Doña Dolores was missing while Marina was in this house. She was still here when Padre Ignatius came with the news that Pepe and the boat were gone. Doubtless she has stolen the plans; but she could not have escaped as you say.”

“That is a mere detail,” said Jack, hastily. “Marina is an Indian, and knows the whole country round for miles. After stealing the plans, she doubtless slipped out of the country gate and travelled up the coast. There a boat from *The Pizarro* could pick her up.”

“Where is Don Miguel?”

“My father was summoned before dawn to a special meeting of the Junta. I believe the assemblage has been sitting all night to deliberate on what is to be done.”

“Oh, my poor Dolores,” groaned Jack, covering his face with his hands; “where are you now?”

“She is on board *The Pizarro*, I doubt not, Don Juan,” said Rafael, approaching the young English-man, “I feel sure this is the case. But courage, mi amigo, we will save your dear one yet.”

“My dear one!” stammered Duval, in some perplexity.

Don Rafael slipped his arm within that of Jack’s, and smiled kindly. “Oh, I know all, Juan. Dolores told me of your love when I returned from Acauhtzin.”

“And you are not angry?”

“Eh! mi amigo! Why should I be angry? It is true you are an Americano—a heretic! but do I not know what love is myself? This makes me kind to you, and when the war is over, I will do all in my power to aid you with my father.”

“Gracias Rafael!” rejoined Duval, wringing his friend’s hand with intense gratitude; “but first we must rescue Dolores from the Indians.”

“I tell you she is not with the Indians, Jack,” said Philip, who had been at the other end of the terrace and just returned within earshot; “she is on board *The Pizarro*.”

“I think so also, Juan. If so, we will chase the war-ship in the vessel of Don Felipe.”

“But I have given her to the Junta, for political, purposes.”

“Bueno! that is so. But when my father returns from the Palacio Nacional, I am certain he will request you, in the name of the Republic, to start for Acauhtzin before noon.”

“In order to demand the surrender of Xuarez,” said Jack, clenching his fist; “those rebels will not do that; but if Dolores is there, I will save them the trouble of answering, by man-handling Don Hypolito till he’ll be fit for nothing but his bed.”

“Dos pajaros al un golpe,” replied Rafael, significantly. “Dolores and Xuarez being the birds, you, mi amigo, the stone. Ah!” he added, as the bell in the cathedral tower chimed the hour, “there is eight o’clock. I think it will be as well, Señores, to have something to eat.”

“I couldn’t eat a thing,” said Jack, abruptly, as they descended the staircase to the patio.

“That is wrong, Juan. You will need all your strength to regain Dolores.”

“Where are the ladies?” asked Philip, anxious to see Doña Eulalia.

“They are not yet up, Don Felipe! Nor do I wish to disturb them, for they are worn out with sorrow.”

On hearing this, Philip agreed that it would be better to let them rest, and accepting Rafael’s invitation, they sat down to a hastily spread meal. In the middle of it, Don Miguel, followed closely by the ubiquitous Tim, entered the patio.

“Buenos Dias, Señores,” said Maraquando, as the young men arose from their meal. “I have news.”

“Of Doña Dolores, Señor?”

“Yes, Don Felipe. Sad news! Alas! there is no doubt of it. She is on board *The Pizarro*.”

“How is this, my father?” asked Rafael, as Jack resumed his seat with a visage of despair.

“A fishing-boat came into the port late last night, and the men reported that they had passed a skiff containing a man and a veiled woman, making for *The Pizarro*.”

“Dolores!” sighed Jack, sadly; “but then, Señor Maraquando,” he added, with reviving hope, “it might have been Marina.”

“No, Señor. Marina was here when Padre Ignatius told us the boat was taken. I fear it is true. My poor niece has been decoyed away by that accursed zambo, and carried to the war-ship. Now she is on her way to Acauhtzin—to the rebel Xuarez.”

“Cheer up, old fellow!” cried Tim, thumping Jack on the shoulder, with a heavy but kindly fist. “We’ll have the colleen back soon. We’re all going to fight the rebels this day.”

“What’s that, Tim? *The Bohemian*—”

“Hold on, Jack! Don Miguel is speaking; he’ll tell you all!”

“Señor Felipe,” said Maraquando, removing his sombrero with suave courtesy; “in the name of the Republic of Cholocaca, I have to thank you for the offer of your ship, and to inform you that the Junta gladly accepts your aid with a thousand thousand thanks.”

“The pleasure is mine, Señor,” said Philip, courteously.

“The Junta, Don Felipe,” resumed Don Miguel gravely, “desire to know if you can leave Tlatonac by noon.”

“Certainly, Señor. By noon *The Bohemian* will steam northward. Are you to be of the party, Señor?”

“I regret to say I am not, Señor. His Excellency is pleased to consider that I will be more useful by his side. The message to Xuarez will be delivered by Don Alonzo Cebrian, the Intendente of the province of Xicotencatl. He will be accompanied by Colonel Garibay, my son Don Rafael, Captain Velez and about twenty soldiers. Can your vessel hold such a company, Señor.”

“Oh yes. If they don’t mind a little discomfort, Don Miguel. *The Bohemian* is rather small for such a number.”

“Fortunately, the voyage will not take long,” added Jack, thankfully. “With myself and you, Philip, the number tots up to twenty-six passengers.”

“Twenty-seven, Jack,” interposed Tim, quickly “I’m not going to miss the fun.”

“But your business, Tim,” remonstrated Philip, in alarm, afraid lest Fletcher’s fighting propensities should cause trouble at Acauhtzin.

“Well, isn’t this my business, sir? Interview with the rebel leader! It’s a fine article I’ll get out of that same, Philip.”

“Right you are, Tim. I’ll be glad of your company. But Peter?”

“We’ll leave him behind, to look after the ladies.”

“Don Miguel,” said Jack, who had been thinking deeply, “is the boat of Señor Felipe to sail under the English or the Cholocacan flag?”

“Under the flag of the opal, Señor.”

“In that case, Señor, a few shots will send her to the bottom, as she approaches Tlatonac. Don Hypolito will suspect treachery and fire on the ship.”

“He dare not fire on the opal banner, Señor.”

“I wouldn’t trust him. He’s a scoundrel,” retorted Jack, savagely. “Besides, war is proclaimed, and Xuarez won’t want any messages of peace.”

“Señor Maraquando,” said Philip, gravely, “I think it will be best to approach Acauhtzin under the English flag. When Don Alonzo delivers the message of the Junta, we can hoist the opal banner.”

“I will speak to his Excellency on the subject, Don Felipe,” replied Maraquando, a trifle haughtily, feeling rather nettled at the implied hint of the opal banner being treated with disrespect. “Meanwhile, you will be ready to start at noon.”

“Yes, Señor; at noon precisely.”

“Bueno! His Excellency and the Junta will be at the sea-gate to see you depart.”

After this, the three Englishmen bowed, and departed to get themselves ready for the journey to Acauhtzin.

“I say, Philip! You rather put the old gentleman’s back up!”

“Oh, confound it. I don’t want *The Bohemian* split up into matchwood. Xuarez will fire on the opal flag; but he’ll think twice before he insults the Union Jack.”

“Let him try,” said Tim, grimly; “and if I’m not kicking my heels at the bottom of the sea, I’ll wire to London about the insult, and bring the British navy like hornets about his ears. Come, John, my boy! Wake up! We’re going to bring back your darling.”

“That is if we can get her from Xuarez,” said Jack gloomily; “but I’m terribly afraid. If any harm has happened to her, I’ll kill him. By gad, I’ll choke the life out of him.”

“I’ll help you, Jack,” said Philip, earnestly, for his blood boiled at the thought of Dolores in the grasp of Xuarez; “but I think you’ll find Dolores can look after herself. Besides, Xuarez will be too much afraid of his allies, the Indians, to harm her.”

“You must change those fine feathers, boys,” said Tim, suddenly.

“And why?”

“Because it will never do to let Don Hypolito know you’re in this shindy. Afterwards it doesn’t matter; but, with the Union Jack flying, you can’t dress as Cholocacan soldiers.”

“Tim is right,” said Jack, after a pause; “we will change our clothes.”

“But not our intentions, Jack,” said Philip, anxious to keep up his friends’ spirits. “Dolores or war!”

“No,” cried Duval, with intense earnestness; “with me it is ‘Dolores or death!’ ”

Chapter XIII

Away To The North

Oh, leave the south, the languid south,
Its cloudless skies, its weary calms;
The land of heat, and glare, and drouth,
Where aloes bloom, and spring the palms.
There water is the best of alms,
To cool the ever-parched mouth;
Oh, with the breezes bearing balms,
Fly northward from the languid south.

Oh, seek the bitter northern skies,
Where falls the snow, and blows the sleet;
‘Mid which the stormy sea-bird cries,
And circles on its pinions fleet.
On rocky shores the surges beat,

And icebergs crystalline arise,
Life thrills our veins with tropic heat,
Beneath the bitter northern skies.

Once more *The Bohemian* was breasting the warm waves of the Pacific, and seemed to rejoice in her freedom like a sentient thing, as she plunged north-ward to Acauhtzin. The smoke poured black from her wide-mouthed funnel, the blades of her propeller, lashing the waters to foam, left behind her a long trail of white, and her sharp nose dipped and fell in the salt brine with every pulsation of the pistons. Beneath the folds of the Union Jack, streaming in the wind, were gathered the Englishmen and the Cholocacans, all light-hearted and hopeful, despite the undoubted peril of their mission. It was no light task to beard Xuarez in his stronghold, to assert the authority of the Republic in the teeth of his army. The mission was a valiant one, but foolhardy, and Tim, if no one else, looked for anything but a peaceful termination to the voyage.

The distance to Acauhtzin was something over three hundred miles, and as *The Bohemian* was swirling along at the rate of seventeen knots an hour, it was hoped she would reach her destination in fifteen hours or thereabouts. Owing to one thing and another, the yacht had not left Tlatonac till close on four o'clock in the afternoon; so, making all allowance for possible accidents and stoppages, at the rate she was going, Philip calculated that he would fetch the northern capital about dawn. He did not wish to venture too near the port in the darkness, as the war-ships were protecting the town, and not seeing the English ensign, might open fire on his yacht, under the impression that she was an enemy. With this idea the engines were slowed down during the voyage, and *The Bohemian* was timed to enter the port some time before noon of the next day.

Owing to the number of people on board (twenty-six souls, in addition to the crew), it was somewhat difficult to provide all with accommodation. Fortunately, however, the nights were warm and rainless, so the soldiers made themselves comfortable on deck, and slept soundly enough, wrapped in their military cloaks. The sailing-master of *The Bohemian*, a tough old salt, by name Simon Benker, growled a good deal at the way in which his spotless decks were being spoiled, but Philip managed to smooth him down by representing the seriousness of the situation. Benker submitted with but ill grace. The yacht was the pride of his life, the darling of his heart, and he had no great love for the inhabitants of Cholocaca. However, Sir Philip was master, and gave the soldiers permission to camp out on deck, so Benker was forced to acquiesce in the arrangement.

The ambassadors, in company with the three Englishmen, took up their quarters in the state-room and cabins. As there were not enough bunks, some of them had to sleep in the saloon, so the younger members of the party gave up the sleeping-berths to the elders, and did their best to make shift in a rough-and-ready fashion. As they sat up late, however, and got up early, this inconvenienced them but little, and the utmost good humour prevailed above and below during the voyage. The crew, with the exception of Benker, fraternised with the soldiers, and their masters entertained the Spanish hidalgos; so, despite all inconveniences, things went off capitally. Even Jack plucked up his spirits now that he was on his way to rescue Dolores, and Philip's excellent brand of champagne had a wonderful effect of keeping the temperament of all up to what Tim called, "concert pitch."

Don Alonzo Cebrian was a pompous old man, whose every second word was, "I, the Intendente." He was as proud as Lucifer, and never alluded to the rebels save by the opprobrious names of canalla, ladrons, demonios, all of which terms were echoed regularly by Captain Velez. This young gentleman, a good-looking spendthrift, with a rather scampish reputation, played the part of echo to please the Intendente, whose daughter he wished to marry for her dowry. The lady was plain, but her father was rich; so Captain Velez was quite willing to sacrifice his good looks and bachelor freedom on the altar of matrimony, provided he was well paid for doing so. Don Rafael was in the highest of spirits at the prospect of seeing

Doña Carmencita, and kept things going by the liveliness of his sallies, while Colonel Garibay smoked endless cigarettes and spoke but little.

After an excellent dinner, which was done full justice to by the hungry Spaniards, they all went on deck, and sat down to smoke and talk. First and foremost, they all paid Sir Philip handsome compliments about the beauty and speed of *The Bohemian*, and then drifted gradually into the one subject of the hour—the war with Xuarez—the embassy to Xuarez—the certainty of punishing Xuarez.

“Begad! Philip,” whispered Tim, who was smoking a villainous black clay pipe, “it’s all Xuarez and nothing else. Is he the only man the Opositores have?”

“So it appears,” replied Philip, leaning back in his chair; “the whole row seems to hinge on Xuarez. Is that not your opinion, Don Rafael?”

“What is that, mi amigo? I do not understand English.”

“That Xuarez is the only capable man on the side of the Opositores?”

“Ladrons!” interrupted Don Alonzo, with stately spite. “I, the Intendente, think otherwise. Xuarez is clever; but, Señores, no one is so clever as Tejada! Canalla!”

“Canalla!” echoed Velez, removing his cigarette, “no one is so clever as Tejada!”

“Don José is being deceived by Xuarez,” said Rafael, ruffled at this allusion to his proposed father-in-law; “he is a pompous old fool, and, if he is wise, will leave Acauhtzin with his family, and place himself under the protection of the Republic.”

“He won’t do that,” replied Garibay, decisively; “he is of too much service to Xuarez. The Opositores have but little wealth, and Tejada is a rich man.”

“Well, no matter, Señores. I, the Intendente, will arrest them both, and carry them in chains to the Junta.”

“I am afraid that will be more difficult than you imagine, Señor,” said Rafael, dryly. “Xuarez is adored by the townspeople of Acauhtzin. He has a passably good army, the friendship of the Indians, who are being urged on to war by that prophetic opal, and a capital fleet. With all these at his command, he would be a fool to yield at the mere reading of a decree. No. This war will be a long one—a difficult one—and it is doubtful if, in the end, Don Hypolito will not conquer.”

Garibay frowned, and looked sternly at the young man.

“Are your sympathies with the Opositores, Señor?”

“By no means. I see in Xuarez a possible tyrant, an unscrupulous scoundrel; but I am not so blinded as to overlook his talents. Already he has scored heavily against us. The securing of the fleet, the gaining of Acauhtzin to his interest, and all without a blow. Believe me, Colonel, I speak truly when I say Xuarez is a foe to be dreaded.”

“He will not dare to defy the decree of the Republic,” said the Intendente, pompously. “When I read this,” added Don Alonzo, tapping his breast pocket, where lay the official paper, “he will yield.”

“Certainly!” echoed Velez, parrot-like, “he will yield. Carambo! He dare not defy Don Alonzo!”

“Do you think Xuarez is a second Montezuma, to yield in the presence of his army, Señores,” cried Rafael, vehemently. “I tell you no! Were he alone, he would resist arrest. How much more so, then, when supported by the devotion of hundreds. I am a true subject of the Republic; I hate, dread, and scorn Don Hypolito. But I do not despise him. He will be the Napoleon of Cholocaca. Let the Republic beware!”

“Ah! bah!” said Colonel Garibay, while Don Alonzo snorted with indignation. “Xuarez may be a clever man; but he is no general. Why, he does not even make the first move!”

“No; he bides his time. When he does move, Tlatonac will hear of it.”

“You mean, he will bombard the city?”

“Yes, and no! I will explain. Excuse me one moment, Señores. I go for a map of the country.”

Don Rafael ran down to the cabin; and during his absence the Intendente and Captain Velez scoffed at the idea that Xuarez would be a dangerous enemy. They had a duet in a braggadocio vein.

“He will yield, Señores, when I read this decree.”

“The troops of Tlatonac alone can crush him,” added Velez, confidently.

“We will swallow these rebels at a mouthful. I, the Intendente, say so.”

“The war will be a mere military promenade!” said his echo.

“So said the French at the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war,” interjected Philip, grimly, “but they made a mistake. What is your opinion, Colonel?”

“I agree with Don Rafael,” replied Garibay, slowly “I am by no means inclined to undervalue our opponent. Xuarez is as cunning as Satan, and as ambitious. His first moves in this war have resulted to his own advantage; therefore I am not so confident of a speedy termination to this campaign as are these gentlemen. Fire-crackers, such as reading a decree will not frighten a man like Xuarez!”

“Then you think this journey useless?” asked Jack, who was of much the same opinion himself.

“Absolutely, Señors. I believe we are on the eve of a terrible struggle, and to whom will result the advantage I know not.”

“If all the Junta were as faint-hearted as yourself and Don Rafael, we would yield without a blow,” said the Intendente, bitterly.

“Without a blow,” from Velez, in the same tone! “Carambo!”

“You are wrong, Señor,” cried the Colonel, with fiery earnestness, “I am not faint-hearted. I will fight against Xuarez to the last. But is it wise to scoff at this man as you are doing? I tell you he is a master-spirit, such as rises once in a century, and, as such, is all-powerful, even against the great power of the Republic. He is one of those men who change the destinies of nations. A Napoleon, a Garibaldi, a Washington. From my soul, Señores, I trust we shall win, and save the Republic; but it is as well to look on both sides of the question. Blind security is not wise. Por todos Santos, Señores,” cried Garibay, rising to his feet in his excitement, “see how this man has already succeeded. Acauhtzin, the most important town next to the capital, is in his hands, our fleet has gone over entirely to his side; and have you forgotten the treachery of Marina and Pepe. A full plan of the fortifications of Tlatonac is before him. If he can do

this much, he can do more. Till the end, I shall support the Republic, and resist a possible Dictator; but do not sneer at Xuarez! I tell you he is a great man!”

This was an unexampled outburst for the ordinarily calm Colonel, and he sank back in his chair with a look of agitation on his usually impassive face. The Intendente and Velez were for the moment impressed; yet, soon recovering their obstinate belief in the invulnerability of the Republic, would have replied, but that at this moment Don Rafael made his appearance with a small map.

“Your pardon, Señores, that I have been so long!” apologised Rafael, sitting down promptly, and spreading out the map on his own and Philip’s knees. “Look, now, mis amigos, and I will tell you how this campaign will be conducted!”

“How do you know, Señor? Are you in the confidence of Xuarez?”

“I am a gentleman, no traitor!” replied Rafael, haughtily, to the insulting question of the Intendente. “I know something of Don Hypolito’s plans, because he spoke of them to Don José de Tejada. Before the revolt of the fleet, I was a visitor at the house of that gentleman, and so learned much. Had Don José known that I would remain true to the Republic, he would have been more cautious. As it was, he spoke sufficiently clearly to let me understand the broad outlines of the campaign as designed by Xuarez.”

“Bueno!” said the Intendente, politely, “I ask your pardon, Don Rafael. And this plan.”

“Behold!” said Rafael, tracing with his finger the various points; “here is Acauhtzin—there Tlatonac!—and at the extreme south you see Janjalla! This last town will be attacked first.”

“And the reason?”

“Carrai! can you not see, Señor Garibay? Between Tlatonac and Acauhtzin are nothing but mountains—no roads, no open spaces. All giant hills, terrible precipices, a few paths made by Indians, and inhospitable deserts, where the land happens to be flat for a few miles. How then can Xuarez convey his army to the capital in that direction?”

“True, true! And most of his soldiers are dragoons.”

“Certainly, he could attack Tlatonac with Indians who are used to their rugged country; but savages, as Xuarez well knows, can do little or nothing against trained troops. In conjunction with his own army, they can do something; but, alone, they are almost useless. Bueno! You see he, will not attack from the north.”

“But why attack Janjalla instead of Tlatonac?” asked Tim, who was anxiously following this discussion, pencil and note-book in hand.

“Look to the south,” replied Don Rafael, promptly. “No mountains between Janjalla and Tlatonac—nothing but rich plains—broad spaces on which armies can manœuvre. Now, if Xuarez conveys his troops by the war-ships south to Janjalla, he can bombard and perhaps take that city.”

“I, the Intendente, deny that!”

“Impossible to take Janjalla,” echoed Velez, nodding his head wisely.

Rafael shrugged his shoulders. It was next to impossible to argue with these obstinate people who would only look at one side of the question.

“We will grant that Janjalla falls into the power of Xuarez,” said Garibay, impatiently; “and afterwards?”

“Afterwards,” resumed the young man, “Xuarez will garrison the town, and concentrate all his troops there.”

“Thus leaving Acauhtzin open to attack,” said Jack, satirically.

“By no means. The war-ships will prevent our troops getting to that town. We cannot get to it by land, and the sea will be blockaded by the rebel fleet.”

“Unless the torpederas—”

“True! unless the torpederas arrive,” replied Rafael significantly; “but it is doubtful as to whether the Junta or Xuarez will get them. However, I am only supposing all these things being in favour of the Opposidores.”

“Bueno! We will look at the matter from Don Hypolito’s point of view,” said Philip, quietly. “His troops are concentrated at Janjalla. Between that town and Tlatonac are open plains—and,” added Philip, dryly, “the armies of the Republic!”

“Certainly. But let us presume, for the sake of argument, that Xuarez makes three simultaneous attacks. With his regular army on the plains, with the Indians from the north on Tlatonac—and from the sea by a bombardment from the war-ships.”

“Dios!” muttered Garibay, biting his fingers; “that man is a general.”

“The troops of the Republic will conquer everywhere,” said Don Alonzo, gravely.

“Everywhere!” repeated his umbra.

“It is to be hoped so, Señores,” said Tim, significantly, “the Republic will need all the help she can get to defend herself in three places at once.”

“In my opinion,” observed Rafael, calmly, “there is only one way to end the war.”

“And that is?”

“By a naval victory. The Junta must secure the torpederas. We must have more war-ships, and cripple Don Hypolito’s power on the sea. Then he will be unable to convey his troops to Janjalla—unable to bombard Tlatonac, and remain shut up in Acauhtzin, where we can crush him at our leisure.”

Garibay disagreed with this view of the matter, and accused Rafael of looking solely at the matter from a naval point of view. A hot discussion ensued, in which every possible attack, repulse, strategy, and battle, was talked over far into the night. Philip and Jack grew weary of this incessant argument, and slipped down to the saloon, where they chatted about Dolores. Overhead they heard the hot-tempered Spaniards arguing fiercely, and several times thought they would come to blows so warm grew the discussion.

“Egad, Jack! I’m glad this voyage ends to-morrow,” said Philip, as they turned in, “or they will certainly murder one another.”

A grunt was Jack’s unsatisfactory reply. He was, almost asleep, and already dreaming of rescuing Dolores from the clutches of Don Hypolito.

After a time, those on deck grew tired of such unprofitable talk, and one by one came down to snatch a few hours' sleep. In the space of fifteen minutes everyone was snoring, and the yacht flew northward with her cargo of sleeping men. Benker was in charge of the wheel, and as he had been in these waters years before, knew every inch of the coast. Keeping the boat about a mile from the shore, he headed her straight for Acauhtzin, which was many miles away, in the curve of the land where it stretched eastward into the Carribean Sea.

It was a perfectly calm night. Stars and moon, a placid sea, and the yacht swirling through the liquid plain with a slight roll. To the right, the infinite expanse of the waters heaving against the horizon; to the left, the long, low line of the coast, with its dim masses of foliage, and here and there a snow-clad mountain peak. Benker twirled the wheel, chewed his quid, and looked every now and then in disgust at the sleeping forms of the soldiers encumbering the white decks of the yacht. Moonlight and starlight, the throb of the screw, the singing of the wind through the rigging, and the hiss of the waves seething past; it was wonderfully beautiful. The boat sped onward like a shadow amid a world of shadows, and the most prosaic soul would have been touched by the profound beauty of this watery world. Not so Simon Benker. He was used to it all, and regarded nothing but his work and the soldiers.

Then the east began to palpitate with the coming dawn. Lines of dim light low down on the horizon—yellow bands which melted to pale green, and flushed to delicate rose colours. Higher and higher the coming day dyed the sky in opaline hues, the stars fled westward, the wan moon paling before this fierce splendour, hid her face behind a bank of clouds. The dark world of waters became tinged with rainbow hues, then one thick yellow shaft of light smote the zenith with heavy brilliance. Ray after ray shot out like the spokes of a wheel, and suddenly the intolerable glory of the sun leaped from the nether world.

"Yonder," said Jack to Philip, who had come on deck to see the sunrise, "yonder, my boy, is the Harlequin Opal!"

"If it is as brilliant and as many-tinted as that," replied the baronet, staring at the gorgeous sky and sea, "it must, indeed, be a wonderful gem. Benker, how is she going?"

"You have no soul," said Duval, turning away. "I am going down to have a tub."

He thereupon vanished again, was shortly followed by Philip, after he had satisfied himself that *The Bohemian* had done good work during the hours of darkness. Afterwards they awoke their sleeping companions, and had breakfast, when the Spaniards were introduced to several English dishes, of which they approved greatly.

The heavens were now a pale turquoise blue, the sun mounting towards the zenith was already beginning to burn hotly, and all were assembled on deck impatiently waiting to catch sight of their destination. Here and there on the green shore, amid the forests they could see Indian settlements, and at times light canoes skimmed the surface of the waves. Towards eleven o'clock a white spot appeared on the land straight ahead. Don Rafael, who was standing by Philip, touched the young man's arm.

"Acauhtzin!" he said, cheerfully; "we will be there in the hour." Philip looked at his watch.

"We left Tlatonac at four yesterday. We will reach Acauhtzin at twelve to-day. Three hundred miles in twenty hours. That is not bad for slow steaming. Had I kept her at full speed, she would have done it in fifteen!"

Tim, who had his glass up, gave an exclamation of surprise.

"What is it, Tim?"

“Three war-ships are lying in the harbour.”

“I thought as much,” replied Philip, calmly; “we will have to run the blockade.”

Tim pointed upward to the Union Jack.

“If they fire on that,” he said slowly, “Xuarez is not the clever man I take him to be. What do you say, Jack?”

“Say!” repeated Jack, who was looking ahead with clenched fists, “that one of those three ships is *The Pizarro*, and that Dolores is on board.”

Chapter XIV

Acauhtzin

Here, where mingle rocks and sands,
Phantom-like the city stands,
Looming vague and ghostly pale,
Through the dawning's misty veil.
Day and night, and night and day,
At the foot of ramparts grey;
Just a stone-throw up the shore
Ever-hungry surges roar,
As they would rejoice to tear
From her heights that city fair,
Where, engirt by forests green,
Proud she sits, a laurelled queen;
Dim the mighty fabric gleams,
As thought-built in magic dreams,
'Tis some palace city hoary,
Famed in song for golden glory,
Which, at dawn, will fade away,
In the traitor light of day.

The city of Acauhtzin was not unlike the capital in appearance, though it differed from Tlatonac in being built on a projecting point of land, instead of on a hill. On either side were mountains, partially enclosing a deep basin, wherein the war-ships were anchored, and on a tongue of rock jutting into the centre of this pool the city was built. The walls white and glistening, arose sheer from the rocky cliffs and above them only a few steeples and towers could be seen. The walls encompassing the tongue of rock formed a kind of citadel, and then ran along the inshore for some distance on each side, terminating in well-defended forts. At the back of the city arose a high mountain, clothed with green forests, from amidst which a mighty peak of snow shot up grandly into the blue sky.

Philip saw all this when the yacht was some distance away, and at once pronounced his opinion of the place.

“It is like Valetta,” he said, handing the glass to Jack. “The city is built, on a tongue of land, the walls rise in the same precipitous fashion, and there are harbours on either side. Were it not for that mighty peak, and the mountains to right and left, it would be the Valetta of the old world.”

On the flag-tower of the principal fort floated the banner of the insurgent leader, the same in all respects as that of the Republic, save that the colour was red instead of yellow. The Harlequin Opal was so interwoven with the history and superstitions of the Cholacacans that Xuarez could not afford to dispense with so powerful a symbol, and on the crimson ground of the flag gleamed the representation of the stone, shooting its myriad rays. At the entrance of the harbour were anchored two heavily armed war-ships, which Don Rafael recognised as *The Cortes* and *The Columbus*. His own vessel, *The Pizarro*, lay further in to the shore, almost across the gate which pierced the wall of the great fort, and gave admission to the city.

With the Union Jack flying at her masthead *The Bohemian* steamed boldly into the harbour between the threatening bulk of the two men-of-war. Through their glasses, those on board the yacht could see there was much excitement at her unexpected appearance both on the ships and on shore. A crowd of people poured out of the gate like a swarm of bees, as *The Bohemian*, slowing down her engines, swung gracefully to anchor beside *The Pizarro*. Just as she cleared the war-ships at the entrance, a puff of smoke broke from the black sides of *The Cortes*, whereat Tim uttered an exclamation of rage.

“It’s insulting the flag they are!”

“No. Blank cartridge,” replied Philip, shrewdly; “they are saluting the Union Jack. Don Hypolito evidently wants to stand well with England. See, they are dipping their flags.”

The three war-ships lowered their pennants for a moment, in salutation to the English flag, and then ran them up again to the masthead. Philip had by this time brought *The Bohemian* directly under the guns of the forts; so that, in any event, she would be safe. The forts could not depress their guns sufficiently to damage her, and the war-ships would not dare to fire lest they should injure the ramparts of the town.

Making everything safe by this artful manœuvre Philip, with the sanction of Don Alonzo, hauled down the Union Jack, to hoist the Republican banner. At first the forts thought the English ship was responding to their salute, and several guns thundered a welcome to the stranger, while the crowd on the shore cheered lustily. All these greetings, however, were changed to cries of anger when the yellow banner of Tlatonac flew up to the masthead of *The Bohemian*. Without doubt, had the yacht been outside, the war-ships would have opened fire on this audacious vessel, to make her pay for such insolence; but Philip, being safe under the walls of the fort, could fly the flag with impunity.

The crowd on the beach and wharf roared with rage, as they saw the hated ensign, and recognised the fact that by this audacious piece of strategy a band of their enemies had gained admission into the very heart of their harbour. Had those on shore been able to get on board *The Bohemian* it would have gone ill with Philip and his friends; but, fortunately, the yacht had cast anchor some distance away, by the side of *The Pizarro*. The crew of the war-ship lined the side of their vessel to look at the daring intruder, and seeing this, Don Rafael, suppressing all outward signs of rage, swore fluently to himself as he recognised the renegades.

In a remarkably short space of time, a boat with the rebel flag hanging over its stern pulled out from the shore, and in a few minutes came alongside *The Bohemian*. A ladder was thrown over at once, and there stepped on deck Don José de Tejada, accompanied by a few officers. He recognised Don Alonzo and his friends at once, for they had been intimates of his before the outbreak of this fratricidal war.

“Don Rafael! Don Alonzo,” said Tejada, in astonishment. “What is the meaning of this, Señores? and how have you the hardihood to display the flag of Tlatonac under the guns of Acauhtzin?”

“I, the Intendente, with these gentlemen, have come hither on a mission to Don Hypolito Xuarez from the Junta of Cholacaca.”

“Oh, you would make peace. The Junta fears the result of an appeal to arms.”

“Carajo, no!” cried Garibay, clapping his hand to his sword. “The Junta fears nothing; much less the rebel Xuarez.”

“Beware, Señor,” said Tejada, as several of his officers muttered angrily; “I cannot protect you, if thus you speak of our honoured President.”

“President!” cried Rafael, in a rage.

“Yes; the President of Cholocaca.”

“Don Francisco Gomez is President?”

“By the will of the aristocrats,” said Don José fiercely; “but Don Hypolito Xuarez is President by the will of the people.”

“Enough of this,” exclaimed the Intendente, waving his hand; “we are here under a flag of truce. Even you, Señor, must respect that. We will deliver our message to Xuarez, and depart unharmed.”

“That is as Don Hypolito wills it.”

“Your pardon, Señor,” interposed Philip, taking off his yachting cap; “this is an English vessel, and as such you dare not seize her.”

“I recognise no vessel as English under those colours,” said Tejada, fiercely, pointing to the opal banner.

“Bueno! I will endeavour to remove your prejudice.”

In another moment Philip had given orders to Benker, and the Union Jack was flying at the other masthead.

“You must respect our neutrality now, Señor.”

Don José bit his lip, and turning to one of his officers, gave an order. The soldier bowed, dropped over the side of the yacht, and went ashore in the boat.

“I have sent to tell Don Hypolito that an embassy has come from Tlatonac,” said Tejada, addressing the Intendente with marked coldness; “in ten or fifteen minutes you shall know his decision.”

“He must receive us, Señor.”

“No doubt; but the question is, will he let you depart?”

“By the law of nations, which recognises the white flag, he must let us go as we came, unharmed.”

“Had you not sailed under the English ensign, you would not have got into the harbour so easily. This boat would be now sunk by the guns of *The Cortes*.”

“I thought as much,” said Philip, easily; “therefore I flew a flag which even you had to respect.”

“And may I ask, Señores,” sneered Don José, with elaborate politeness, “under which flag you sail? the English, the Opal, or the White?”

“Under the white,” replied Garibay, promptly.

“Good! Then lower those two banners, and run up the white flag.”

“I’ll see you hanged first!” retorted Philip, bluntly. “This is an English vessel, and I defy you to touch it or the flag.”

Tejada blushed red with rage, for he knew that Xuarez, anxious to stand well in his quarrel with the great nations of Europe, would not dare to insult the Union Jack. In fact, seeing that the deputation had arrived in an English vessel, Tejada was well assured in his own mind that it would be received and sent away with the utmost courtesy, let their message from the Junta be galling as it might be. Xuarez was no barbarian, and in any case would have treated a flag of truce with honour, but the presence of these English gentlemen, of this English ship, put the matter beyond all doubt.

Under these circumstances, Tejada was unable to reply to Sir Philip; but suppressing his wrath with a great effort, bowed politely and turned away. As he did so, Don Rafael sprang forward, as also did Jack, both eager to learn if Dolores was in the town.

“I will speak, amigo,” said Rafael, hurriedly to Jack. “I know Don José, as my private friend, though public enemy; he will answer me.”

“Your servant, Señor!” remarked Tejada, stiffly, finding himself face to face with Don Rafael.

“Señor,” said the young man, taking off his sombrero with ceremonious politeness, “we are enemies because we follow different leaders; but I implore you, by the friendship which once existed between us, to answer a question I would ask.”

“Surely, Señor! You were ever welcome at my table, in time of peace. As you say, we are now enemies; but God forbid that this unhappy war should banish all courtesies between gentlemen. What question do you wish to put, Señor? It shall be answered.”

“Is my cousin—is Doña Dolores at Acauhtzin?”

Tejada started, and seemed much surprised.

“No, Señor Maraquando, she is not here. Why ask me such a strange question?”

“Not here!” cried Jack, who also knew Tejada well; “but she must be here, Señor Tejada; she has been carried off from Tlatonac, taken on board yonder vessel,”—pointing to *The Pizarro*—“and is now in Acauhtzin with Don Hypolito.”

“I swear to you, Señor Duval, that you wrong us. You wrong Don Hypolito,” replied Don José, earnestly. “I am aware that our leader loves Doña Dolores, and desires to marry her, but he would not carry her off so basely. No, Señor,” continued Tejada, proudly; “we are men of honour, we do not make war on women. When Don Hypolito conquers, he will ask for the honour of Doña Dolores’ hand in due form. She is not here, I swear.”

“Great Heavens!” cried Jack, in despair. “Can this be true?”

“Don José,” said Rafael, eagerly, “I know you to be a man of honour. I do not doubt your word; but I feel sure that my cousin is here.”

“Señor!”

“I do not say that you know, or are deceiving me,” went on Rafael, rapidly. “But look you, Don José. There is a zambo called Pepe, who acted as a spy for your party at Tlatonac. The other night he decoyed my cousin from the cathedral on board *The Pizarro*. A fisherman saw Pepe rowing to the war-ship, with a female in his boat.”

“Bueno! That is so,” interrupted Tejada, bluntly; “but the woman was a poblana—one Marina.”

“Marina!” cried Duval, savagely. “Then I have been tricked. We have all been wrong! Doña Dolores must be with the Indians.”

“I trust, Señor, your fears are groundless; but if Doña Dolores is with the Indians, she will be quite safe. They reverence her as the guardian of the Chalchuih Tlatonac.”

“Does Don Hypolito know anything about the Indians?” asked Rafael, hurriedly.

“That question, Señor, I am not at liberty to answer.”

Rafael cast one swift and penetrating glance at the impassive face of the old man, and turned away with a suppressed oath.

“Carrai!” he muttered, fiercely, to Philip, who stood by, a silent spectator. “I believe Xuarez is in league with the Indians, and has made them carry her off. If she is not here, she is at that hidden temple; but, in either case, Don Hypolito is mixed up with the case.”

“In my humble opinion, she is at Acauhtzin,” said Philip, quietly. “Don José does not know all the black dealings of Xuarez’s heart. Cheer up, my dear Jack, we will soon see Don Hypolito, and wring the truth from him.”

Jack muttered something indistinctly, and turned away, whereon Philip, taking him kindly by the arm, led him down to the saloon, with the intention of giving him such consolation as he was able.

“If she is here, Xuarez must know,” said Philip, earnestly; “and if he knows, he will not be able to deceive me. I can read most faces, and it will be strange indeed if Don Hypolito’s is the first to baffle me.”

“Don José denies everything.”

“Yes; because Don José knows nothing. That old man is a pompous old ass, like the Intendente. Many things could take place under his nose without his being any the wiser. Drink this glass of wine, my dear lad, and keep up your spirits. We will find Dolores yet.”

Duval was so overcome by the loss of Dolores that he submitted to Philip’s orders like a child, and obediently drank the wine poured out for him. In most emergencies, Jack would have been ready to act at once with a cool head, and iron nerve; but Dolores was very dear to him, and her loss had rendered him useless for the moment—in other words, the shock had paralysed his will.

After Philip had succeeded in putting some heart into the poor fellow, he insisted on his coming on deck, and they ascended thereto just in time to see the return of the officer sent by Tejada to Don Hypolito. The

messenger walked straight up to Don José, and gave the reply of Xuarez, on hearing which, Tejada turned towards the waiting Intendente.

“His Excellency Don Hypolito Xuarez will see you at his palace.”

Don Alonzo almost choked with rage at hearing these terms applied to a rebel like Xuarez, but managed to bow with tolerably good grace. He moved towards the side of the yacht, and scrambled down into the boat in a somewhat ungraceful fashion for an ambassador. Colonel Garibay, Don Rafael, and the Englishmen followed, together with Tejada and his staff.

Tim, who had been fraternising with the rebels, showed his note-book to Jack, filled with shorthand notes.

“I’ve got no end of information,” he said gleefully; “and when I get back to Tlatonac, it goes to the *Morning Planet* straight.”

“That is if we ever do get back,” said Jack, gloomily.

“Of course we will, you pessimist; and, what’s more, we’ll take back Doña Dolores with us.”

“Do you think she is here, then, after all?” asked Duval, with reviving hope.

Tim winked in a vulgar fashion.

“A word in your ear, Jack,” he said, jerking his head in the direction of the pompous Tejada. “That old man’s a liar. The pretty colleen is here, and Don José knows it? but she’s not with Don Hypolito.”

“Then where do you think she is?”

“With Rafael’s sweetheart, no less; the old man’s daughter.”

“Doña Carmencita?”

“You’ve hit it.”

Jack would have questioned Tim further, so as to learn his grounds for such a belief, but just then the boat touched the stone steps of the wharf. The embassy stepped ashore, and waited till the soldiers of Tlatonac arrived. Don Alonzo, with a due regard for the dignity of the Republic, refused to move until his bodyguard came on shore. In a few minutes, the soldiers landed, under the command of Captain Velez, and thus escorted, the ambassador of the Republic moved slowly forward, beneath the mighty arch which led into the heart of the rebel capital.

“We’ve got in, Señor,” whispered Rafael to Philip with sudden doubt; “but I hope we shall be able to get out.”

Philip pointed back to the Union Jack, which could be seen in the distance at the yacht’s masthead.

“While that flag is there I have no fear, Don Rafael.”

Chapter XV

Don Hypolito Xuarez

A visionary? Wherefore not? All men
Who change the world are dreamers in their youth.
Thought comes before fulfilment!—in the earth,
The hidden seedling hints the future flower!
So is it with this man! For years his brain
Hath dallied with a thousand fantasies,
Which had no being save within himself.
But now his dreams take shape!—with purpose firm,
He aids their due fulfilment, till therefrom
New heavens and earth are formed, and ancient things
Crashing to ruin, as foundations serve
Whereon to build earth's future destinies.

There was no doubt that Don Hypolito laid due stress on ceremonial observances as necessary to consolidate his pretensions. On the ground that Gomez had broken the constitutional rules by which he held his position, Xuarez proclaimed himself saviour and President of the Cholocacan Republic. Not being in possession of Tlatonac, he constituted Acauhtzin his capital for the time being, and there assumed all the airs of a ruler. He called himself by the title of President, his personal staff and intimate friends constituted a kind of revolutionary Junta, and the building in which this illegal assemblage met for conference was dignified with the name of the Palacio Nacional. In all respects the machinery of the lawful Government was copied at Acauhtzin, and that town was regarded by the Opposidores as the true capital of the country until such time as Xuarez should enforce his pretensions by marching in triumph into the head city of the Republic. As in the Middle Ages two Popes ruled—the one at Rome, the other at Avignon—so the allegiance of Cholocaca was claimed by two Presidents: Gomez at Tlatonac, Xuarez at Acauhtzin.

The extraordinary man who avowed himself the saviour of his country possessed in a marked degree that power of dominating all with whom he came in contact by the personal charm of his manner. This dæmonic influence is a peculiar characteristic of all great men, without which they could not hope to accomplish their missions. Napoleon changed the map of Europe, Mahomet created a religion, Cæsar consolidated the Roman Empire, Luther tore half the civilised world from the grip of ecclesiastical Rome. These great events sprang in the first instance from the strong personality of the men who accomplished them, hence the performance of what appear to be miracles. Don Hypolito Xuarez, son of a Spanish adventurer and an Indian woman, possessed this dæmonic influence, and gifted with such power, arose from obscurity to the full glory of supreme power. Nowhere was his authority more noticeable than in Acauhtzin. Years before a political adventurer, he had been accepted by the people of that town as their deputy to the Junta. Acauhtzin, always jealous of the superiority of Tlatonac, was desirous that the seat of Government should be transferred thither from the city of the opal. This ambition was fostered by the crafty Xuarez, who saw therein a safe way of gaining the love of the northern capital. After he had accused Gomez in the Junta of breaking the rules of the constitution, he came northward to claim the protection of his constituents, a protection which was freely accorded to one who had their interests so much at heart.

Cunning Don Hypolito saw his position and how he could better it. Casting all his fortunes on one bold stroke, he assembled the townspeople in the great plaza, and harangued them with all his marvellous powers of oratory. Gomez had tampered with the sacred constitution of Cholocaca. Gomez was therefore unworthy to occupy the Presidential chair. One man alone could save the country, that man was himself. Let them throw in their fortunes with his, and resort to arms to enforce his elevation to the supreme power. Then he would transfer the seat of Government from Tlatonac to Acauhtzin, and the northern port would become the greatest city in Central America. Dazzled by this vision, the townspeople elected Don Hypolito President with enthusiasm, and vowed to stand by him to the end. That end they never for a moment doubted would be victory over the established Government, and the transference of the seat of

power from Tlatonac to Acauhtzin. They firmly believed in Don Hypolito as the man of the future, and when, by a skilful stroke of diplomacy, he secured the support of the Regimiento de Huitzilopochtli and of the fleet, his triumph was complete. He who could do so much could do more! The admiring townsfolk swore by the brilliant adventurer, and when the message carried by Don Alonzo arrived at the northern capital, the crafty Mestizo was the idol of the populace. The ironical part of the whole affair was that he had no intention of fulfilling any promises made to his trusting constituents.

Jack, owing to his long residence in Tlatonac, was already acquainted with Xuarez, but both Tim and Philip were exceedingly curious to behold this man, of whom they had heard so much, and who seemed to hold the destinies of the Republic in the hollow of his hand. In the Great hall of the Palacio Nacional (so called) they beheld him for the first time, waiting to receive the emissaries of the Government. Surrounded by a brilliant throng of officers, he alone was plainly dressed, no uniform, no gaudy tints, no decorations, yet his personality raised him high above those by whom he was encircled. The supporters of Xuarez were mediocrites; Xuarez himself was a great man.

The revolutionary leader was small of stature, ungraceful in appearance; his legs were short, his body was long, so that he rather waddled than walked. At first sight this ungainly figure, this ungraceful gait, was apt to bring a smile to the lips of the onlooker, but that smile faded before the grand countenance surmounting the misshapen frame. It was as though the head of a Greek statue had been, by mistake, joined on to the body of a Polynesian idol; the first was so noble, the latter so grotesque. A Roman head, such as tradition ascribes to the Cæsars, a Napoleonic face, calm, powerful, terrible as the impassive countenance of the Sphinx. Broad forehead, prominent nose, large eyes, full of fire and determination; no beard or moustache to hide the contour of the cheeks, the strong curve of the mouth, a skin of marble whiteness, and the whole surmounted by masses of waving hair, dark as the eyes beneath. Such faces are seen on the coins of the Cæsars, on the painted walls of Egyptian tombs, on the carven walls of Assyrian palaces. They belong alone to kings, to heroes, to conquerors. Nature marks her great men thus. When such faces of terrible calm appear at intervals of centuries, mankind trembles, they recognise the scourges of God, destined to whelm the world in waves of blood. Philip came to see Xuarez—he looked, and lo! Napoleon.

“The struggle is unequal,” he whispered to Jack, as Don Alonzo unrolled his papers.

“Yes,” replied Duval, in the same tone. “His force is too weak to stand against the power of the Junta.”

Philip smiled scornfully.

“What can the Junta do against that face?” he said, contemptuously. “There stands the greatest man in Cholacaca.”

“D—n him,” muttered the engineer, fiercely, “he has carried off Dolores.”

“Silence, boys,” growled Tim, in a voice of subdued thunder, “the Don’s speaking.”

The Intendente was not a particularly brave man, and hardly liked the position in which he now found himself. His mission had appeared to be great and grand and glorious at Tlatonac! but now it assumed quite a different complexion. To utter threats against the rebel Xuarez, when in the society of friends, was one thing; to order the followers of the revolutionary President to give him up to punishment, in the middle of his army, was another. Don Alonzo Cebrian hummed and hawed, and cleared his throat, to get down a nasty lump which impeded his speech. Don Hypolito saw his confusion, but said nothing, he did not even smile, but sat serenely in his chair, impenetrable as the Sphinx. At last the Intendente screwed up his courage and delivered the decree of the Junta—sufficiently badly, it is true—still, he delivered it.

“As the legally qualified representative of the Junta of Cholocaca, in congress assembled, I hereby order those in arms against the Republic to surrender to the Government, and to deliver up for punishment the body of the rebel, Hypolito Xuarez, for—”

He did not finish his sentence. A low murmur of rage arose from the supporters of the rebel leader, and, half-drawing their swords, they looked towards Xuarez for authority to cut down the daring man who had thus insulted him in the midst of his army. Don Alonzo turned pale at the sight of the half-bared weapons, and shrank back among his friends; but Xuarez, leaning his chin on his hand, stared steadily before him and waited. Seeing this impassive demeanour, which he was not clever enough to know was more dangerous than an outburst of rage, Don Alonzo regained his spirits. A more unfitted diplomatist than Cebrian could scarcely have been chosen.

“I need not speak at any great length,” he said, rapidly. “The orders of his Excellency Francisco Gomez are that the town of Acauhtzin surrender to the Government, deliver up the rebel Xuarez for punishment, and submit to the clemency of the Junta. If this is done at once, the Junta will be lenient; if not, the opal standard will be unfurled, and all the inhabitants of Acauhtzin will be treated as rebels. This is the decree of Don Francisco Gomez on the part of the Junta of Cholocaca, delivered by myself the Intendente of Xicotencatl.”

Then, Cebrian, having delivered his message sufficiently badly, rolled up his papers with the air of a man who has done his duty, and waited the reply of the rebel leader. All those on the side of Xuarez frowned heavily, but made no demonstration of wrath at the insolence of the message. They waited to hear Don Hypolito speak. The Mestizo arose to his feet, and addressed himself, not to the emissaries of the Republic, but to his own supporters.

“Señores,” he said, in a singularly mellow and powerful voice, “you hear the decree of the so-called Junta of Cholocaca. Lest you should mistake the purport of the message delivered by Don Alonzo Cebrian, I will repeat it shortly. You are to lay down your arms, surrender my body to the Junta, and trust to the tender mercies of your rivals of Tlatonac for judgment. These are the conditions, which, if not accepted, will bring on us the thunderbolts of war from a Government who have not a navy, and scarce an army. Your answer?”

Hitherto he had spoken in a low tone, clear and distinct, but distinguished by no oratorical fire. At the last words, however, his voice rang through the hall like thunder, and he repeated them with emphasis.

“Your answer, Señores?”

“No! no! no! Viva Xuarez! Viva el gefe! Abaja, Gomez!”

Don Hypolito listened to those fierce responses with a smile of pleasure on his usually immobile face, and when the clamour died away, arose slowly to his feet. Facing the messengers of the Republic, he addressed them sharply, laconically.

“You hear, Señores. Go!”

“You refuse!” said Don Alonzo, scarcely able to believe his ears.

“I refuse to surrender myself to your tyrants. The people of Acauhtzin refuse to lay down their arms. Between myself and the illegal Junta now sitting at Tlatonac, there is no friendship, no trust, no faith. They proclaim me a rebel! I, Hypolito Xuarez, proclaim war!”

He flung up his hand with a fiery gesture, and as he did so a hundred swords flashed from their scabbards.

“War!” cried those in the hall. “War! Viva Xuarez!”

Don Alonzo tore the message of the Republic in twain, and cast the pieces at the foot of the dais whereon Xuarez was seated.

“So be it!” he cried, turning his back, “War!”

“Hold!” said Xuarez, in a voice of thunder. “You came, Señores, under the protection of the English flag. You go with the opal banner flying at your masthead. Such a precaution was useless. I am not a barbarian to fire on a flag of truce; but you—you, Señores, are cowards to thus distrust an honourable foe.”

Before the Intendente could speak, Philip sprang forward, and faced the speaker.

“The fault, Señor, if fault it be, is mine. The vessel in which we came is English, and, therefore, flies the English flag. In the port, I hoisted the opal banner, to show that these gentlemen were on board, and had come on a mission from the Junta.”

“An excellent explanation!” sneered Hypolito, frowning; “but untrue!”

“Señor!”

“Untrue, I say! You thought I would fire on your ship! You looked on me as a barbaric foe! You mistrusted me!”

“And who would not?” said Jack’s deep voice savagely, “who would not mistrust one who makes war on women?”

“Be quiet, Jack.”

“I do not understand you, Señor Duval,” said Xuarez, who knew the young engineer quite well. “Explain!”

“Doña Dolores, the niece of Don Miguel Maraquando, has been kidnapped from Tlatonac! I accuse you of carrying her off.”

“I deny it, Señor! It is false,” cried the rebel leader, a flush reddening the marble whiteness of his face. “Doña Dolores is not in Acauhtzin.”

“She may not be here, Señor, but you know where she is!”

“I do not, Señor! You have no proof of what you say.”

“Pepe, the zambo, a spy in your pay, carried off a woman from Tlatonac,” cried Rafael, stepping forward. “That woman was my cousin, Dolores.”

Xuarez started, and spoke rapidly to one of his officers, who thereupon left the room.

“Ah! you know much, Señor,” he resumed, scornfully; “but you are wrong; the zambo was my spy—”

“Carambo!”

"I repeat he was my spy in Tlatonac," said Xuarez, coolly; "and he left the city with a plan of your fortifications."

"Por todos Santos," roared Garibay, fiercely, clapping his hand on his sword.

"Call on whom you like, Señor Commandante! I have no reason to hide this from you or from the Junta, else would I have kept silent. I know when to hold my tongue, Señores; I know when to speak! I speak now! Go back and tell your President that I have a full plan of Tlatonac in my possession, and that I will use it to take your city, and level its walls to the ground."

"If you can do so!" said Garibay, tauntingly.

"If I can do so. As you say," replied Xuarez, suddenly recognising that this controversy was unworthy of his rank; "we need say no more on that subject. Ha!" he added, as the officers, with a man and a woman, entered the hall, "here is Pepe! and here, Señores, is the woman he carried off."

The woman threw back her rebozo.

"Marina!" cried Jack, in despair.

"You see, Señores," said Don Hypolito, serenely, "I am not the base one you think me to be."

"I'm not so sure of that," muttered Tim, under his breath.

"But this, Señores, is outside the question. You came to me with a message from the Junta. I have answered that message. Go! Go, and carry back to Tlatonac my defiance and that of Acauhtzin. Sail away under your opal flag, caballeros, and I promise you my guns will respect your vessel. Adios. Go!"

He pointed imperiously down the hall to where the great doors stood wide open, and, headed by Don Alonzo, the deputation retired. Rafael was biting his lips with rage, and Garibay was swearing under his breath. The exit was scarcely dignified or worthy of the greatness of the Republic.

"I never felt so mean in my life," whispered Philip to Tim. "What a beast the man is!"

"And you said he was a great man!"

"So he is. But even great men are human. Xuarez is not perfect; but I believe he is honourable as regards rules of warfare. We can leave the harbour in safety."

"I doubt that, my boy," said Tim, significantly; "the man's a liar!"

"What!" said Jack, overhearing this; "do you think that Dolores—?"

"I think that he knows where she is."

"Then I'll stay here till he gives her up."

"You'll stay here a long time, then. She is not in Acauhtzin."

"Then where is she?"

“It’s more nor I know.”

They were marching down the street on their way to the sea-gate, surrounded by their own soldiers and a troop of the Regimiento de Huitzilopochtli. Around this living barrier raged the populace, who had heard of the message sent by the Republic, demanding the surrender of Xuarez, and were mad with anger. To give up the idol of their hearts—the man on whom the glorious future of Acauhtzin depended! It was an insult! If they could have got at the emissaries, they would have torn them to pieces; but, fortunately, the line of soldiers prevented this. Don Alonzo was pale with terror, but Rafael and Garibay swore loudly at the rebel crowd. The three Englishmen smiled scornfully and marched serenely along, not heeding the savage howling of the mob, which recognised them as foreigners.

“Abajo los Americanos! Mueran los Yankies!”

“We would have rather a hard time out there,” said Philip, as Tim, his huge frame shaking with anger, ranged alongside of him. “Keep together boys. Where’s Jack?”

“Behind, with Don Rafael. Don’t trouble, Philip; Jack Duval has his six-shooter on him.”

“Good! I hope I am not a coward,” said the baronet, serenely, as a clod of earth hit him on the shoulder; “but I will be glad when we are safe on board *The Bohemian*.”

“So will I. This is like Donnybrook Fair. But we’re nearly outside the town. Glory be to the saints!”

As they approached the gate, the fury of the mob increased, and it took all the strength of the soldiers, tramping shoulder to shoulder, to prevent them breaking through and falling on the emissaries of the Junta. At the gate, however, a soldier stumbled and fell, whereon, through the gap thus formed, a torrent of men rushed, shouting wildly. The escort fought bravely, and the rebel soldiers did their best to save the ambassadors. It would be a disgrace to Acauhtzin to let the mob have their will.

Inch by inch they fought their way down to the sea-shore, surrounded by the howling multitude. Philip knocked down a man who tried to snatch his watch-chain, and Tim, head and shoulders above the torrent of humanity, whacked every head he saw heartily with his heavy stick. “When you see a head, hit it.” That was Tim’s rule of warfare. He picked it up at Donnybrook Fair, and applied it practically in his present predicament.

At the water’s edge they were hurried into several boats, and amid a shower of stones and mud, managed to get on board the yacht. As soon as all were on deck, Benker, without waiting for instructions, started the boat. Philip stood at the side of the ship and shook his fist at the shore.

“You scoundrels!” he raged, fiercely. “You dishonourable wretches.”

“And Xuarez is a great man,” scoffed Tim, wiping the blood from his face.

“Well,” retorted Philip, viciously, “he’s not responsible for this mob.”

“When we return,” swore Rafael, who stood near him, “we will level those walls with the sand.”

By this time the yacht had passed out of the harbour, and was steaming between the two war-ships. Don Alonzo began to recover his courage.

“Thanks to the Holy Virgin, we are all safe, Señores,” he said, in a trembling voice. “The Junta will bitterly resent this insult shown to the Intendente of Xicotencatl.”

Philip looked around with an alarmed expression of countenance.

“Where’s Jack?”

“Jack!” cried Tim, in a stentorian voice.

There was no answer.

“Señor Juan was with me,” said Rafael, quickly, “but I lost him from my side outside the gate.”

“He must be down below,” said Philip, greatly disturbed, and went off to the cabin. In a few moments he reappeared.

“He is not there. My God! Can he be lost?”

The yacht was searched thoroughly, but no trace of Jack Duval could be found. Philip wanted to put back and rescue his friend, who had been evidently left ashore.

“Impossible, Señor!” cried Don Alonzo, in alarm; “it is dangerous.”

“I do not care. Do you think I am going to leave my dear friend to be torn to pieces by these savages?” raged Philip, stamping his foot.

“The soldiers will protect him,” said Garibay, who was terribly upset at the discovery of their loss. He was very fond of Jack.

“Did they protect us?” said Tim, who was quite beside himself with grief and rage. “Turn her head back, Philip.”

Don Rafael, Tim, and the baronet were all in favour of doing this, but Don Alonzo and Garibay said it would be madness. By this time they were beyond the range of the fort guns, and in safety; but notwithstanding the remonstrances of the terrified Intendente, Philip altered the course of the boat, and started back to the harbour.

“I will save Jack, if I die for it,” he said, fiercely.

Just as *The Bohemian* approached the warships, a puff of smoke burst from the sides of both, and two balls ricocheted across the waves.

“Not blank cartridge this time,” muttered Tim, grimly, “The dirty cowards, to fire on an unarmed boat. And the forts!”

One! two! three! four! A perfect cannonade thundered from the forts, and one of the spars of the boat was carried away. The warships repeated their fire, and, against his will, Philip was forced to stop the engines. It was no use running into a hornet’s nest. Another quarter of a mile, nay less, and *The Bohemian* would be smashed to pieces. The engines were reversed, and Philip shook his fist wildly at the town.

“First Dolores! then Jack! Oh, cursed, cursed town!”

Chapter XVI

Rivals

I this side! You that side!—a woman between us,
You love her!—I love her!—each fain would caress her.
By Paul, I will never surrender this Venus,
For I in my arms would for ever possess her.

You say that she loves you! A lie!—for she told me
Her heart had no caring for love or for lover.
Let her but a moment behold you! behold me!
And he whom she chooses we'll quickly discover.

Well, say!—we'll suppose it!—to you she is tender!
And goes with you thither; while I remain lonely,
Think you that this woman I thus would surrender?
Nay! she shall remain with me! mine to be only.

Why, you are my captive! but though I can slay you!
Give over this folly—you'll find me a true man!
Nay more, you are free, honoured, wealthy—what say you?
What madman refuse you!—then lose life and woman.

Jack recovered his senses in complete darkness. He put his hand to his head and heard the clank of a fetter, felt the cold iron clasp his wrist. He moved his legs, more chains, and the unexpected discovery that he was lying on straw. Not a ray of light anywhere to be seen. On all sides darkness, the darkness of Egypt. Rolling heavily to one side with a groan of pain forced from him by his aching head, he felt the cold chill of a stone floor. Straw, chains, stones, darkness! What did it all mean? He tried to think, but his head was confused, stunned as with a blow. It was a blow! For at the back of his cranium he felt a wound, his fingers were moist with his own blood.

Slowly, slowly, his scattered senses came back to him, and he strove to recall all that had taken place since he had left the Palacio Nacional. Yes! he had gone down the street with the rest of his friends. Rafael had walked by his side, Philip and Tim had marched on in front. Then the howling mob on all sides dashing itself against the lines of soldiers. A dragoon had fallen by the sea-gate just as they were on the verge of safety—the mob rushed in through the gap—then he remembered fighting desperately—a blow on the head—a cowardly blow delivered from behind, and he remembered no more. Remembrance ceased with that blow, it revived again here in darkness, with him lying on a straw bed chained like a prisoner. A prisoner! Jack saw his position in a moment—he was in prison, at the mercy of his rival, of the lover of Dolores, of Don Hypolito Xuarez, rebel and traitor.

“Great Heaven,” moaned Jack, as the horrors of his situation slowly dawned on his confused brain, “this must all have been designed by that scoundrel, Xuarez. His promises that we should go unscathed were all lies. Philip! Tim! poor Rafael! Where are they now? Perhaps in this accursed prison.”

It was so dark that he was afraid to move lest he should fall into danger. At length he put out his hand cautiously, and, kneeling forward, felt all round his bed. The straw was simply thrown on the floor in a heap, and on three sides he found nothing but the pavement, on the fourth the massive stones of the wall. Unexpectedly his hand touched a crock of water, and drawing this towards him, he found it full, much to his delight, as, owing to his wound, he was consumed with a burning thirst. After taking a good draught, he sat back on his straw to think of what he should do next.

Jack was always cool in time of danger. The obstacles which would have appalled other men only sharpened his wits, and as his brain was now clearer, he set himself to work to think over the situation. Before doing this, however, he soaked his handkerchief in the little water remaining at the bottom of the crock, and bound it round his head. The cool cloth somewhat assuaged the throbbing of his wound and thus quieted his heated brain.

On leaving Tlatonac, Jack and his friends had doffed their fine uniforms as likely to compromise them in the eyes of Xuarez, and reassumed their European garb. He was, therefore, dressed in a Norfolk jacket, with trousers of rough blue serge, these latter being tucked into high riding-boots of untanned leather. The pith helmet he had worn had evidently been knocked off in the struggle at the sea-gate, as his head was bare; but, on feeling his pockets, he found everything else was safe. Money, knife, keys, they were all there; but his revolver was gone, a loss which he much regretted.

The first thing he did was to remove his fetters, which he managed with some difficulty and the assistance of his knife. Luckily they were only of light steel, and had evidently been put on more through the malignity of Xuarez than because they prevented his escape. Indeed, it was a useless precaution, for, even now that they were removed, he knew not where he was, and in which direction to turn for egress. With his knife he managed to bend back the links of one chain so that it parted, leaving the steel ring still on the wrist; but, with considerable pain to his hand, he managed to slip it through the other. As regards the rings round his ankles, Jack was unusually powerful, and, in spite of his wound, with the strength of despair, managed to wrench the locks of the chains asunder. The steel chains were old and badly made, else he would not have freed himself so easily; but as it was, after half-an-hour's hard work, he managed to get rid of the chains, and stood up with no manacles on him, save the steel ring on his left wrist, with a few links dangling therefrom.

Free so far, he next placed his head against the rough damp stones of the wall, and cautiously moved round his cell. A few steps from his bed brought him against another wall, at right angles to the former. Following this, he soon arrived at the other side of the prison, and felt his way along the opposite wall. Towards the end of this, he stumbled over a flight of squat, stone steps, projecting into the prison, and by careful touching, managed to ascertain that those led up to a low door of wood, clasped with iron. Beyond, a short space, and another wall, at right angles, and so back to his straw bed, on which he resumed his seat.

"Fifteen by twenty," muttered Jack, taking another drink of water, "and steps leading down from the door. Damp walls too. I guess this cage is in the basement of one of the forts, or below the Palacio Nacional. That cursed Xuarez! One of his men stunned me in that fight with a foul blow, and they then clapped me in here. I wonder what he intends to do with me. He knows I love Dolores, and am his rival; so I expect he'll make things pretty hot for me, if he can. Well, at all events, my life is safe, for what with Philip and Tim to stand by me, he dare not kill me."

Then a sudden dread entered his mind regarding Philip and the war correspondent.

"If they should be killed in that row, or clapped in prison also! No, I don't believe that. Putting Philip out of the question, Xuarez is too cunning to hurt a war correspondent of a great English paper. He wants to stand well with the world in this struggle, and would not dare to risk the outcry of anything happening to Tim. I expect they all got back safely to the yacht. Xuarez could afford to let them go with his defiance to Tlatonac. He only wanted me because I am his rival in the affections of Dolores. The question is, has he got her in his power also? He says 'no,' but the man's a liar, whom it is impossible to believe. Hang this wound."

It was burning with heat, and taking off the bandage, he dipped it into the dregs of water remaining. Then he bound it over the wound again, and took out his watch, which luckily had not been stolen, as it was safely stowed inside his Norfolk jacket. With his fingers, he delicately felt the hands.

“Six o’clock!” he said, somewhat startled; “and we left the palace at three. I’ve been three hours in this cursed hole. It must be still light, or, rather, twilight; so, as it is here as dark as pitch, this cell must be built far down. Hang them! do they intend to starve me?”

He felt vainly for the traditional loaf of bread, which always accompanies the pitcher of water in prisons, but, to his dismay, could find none. This pointed to one of two things. Either Xuarez intended to starve him to death, or would visit him shortly with a meal. He would not dare to do the former, as Jack, feeling sure his friends had escaped, knew the outcry of these against the rebel leader would be great, did he carry his hatred so far; and as to the latter, the young man hopefully waited, in the hope that his gaoler would soon arrive.

“He won’t come himself, I suppose,” said Jack, throwing himself down on his straw; “some soldiers will come and escort me to the upper world. Hang it! if the man isn’t a thorough blackguard, he’ll let me have a meal and a doctor. My head is aching like, to split. Even a candle would be acceptable in this infernal gloom.”

Clearly there was nothing for it but to wait till some one entered the cell. Jack was too wise to waste his time in kicking at the door, or exhaust his strength in shouting for help. He was in the power of Xuarez, and it depended on future events as to how matters would turn out. Of one thing Jack felt confident, and that was that even if Philip and the others reached the yacht in safety they could do nothing.

“I guess Xuarez brought the guns to bear on *The Bohemian*, and ordered Philip to clear out. He could do nothing against that order, so I expect the boat is by this time on her way back to Tlatonac with the news of my capture or death. I’ll have to wait here until the Junta captures the town, and Lord only knows when that will be. I wouldn’t mind so much if I only knew of the whereabouts of Dolores.”

Thus talking to himself, in order to keep up his spirits, this unfortunate young man sat for some considerable time, waiting with philosophic resignation the turn of events. By means of his watch, he calculated that it was close on eight o’clock before he was disturbed. Then he heard the sound of a bolt slipping out of its socket, the door of his cell opened, and a man appeared. A man draped in a long black cloak, flung Spanish fashion over his left shoulder, and wearing a broad-leaved sombrero which effectually concealed his features. He carried a lantern which illuminated the cell with a sufficiently feeble light, but it was comforting to Jack, after the intense darkness of the previous hours, and enabled him to see whom was his visitor.

The stranger closed the door of the cell, descended the steps, and advanced towards Jack, swinging the lantern to and fro so as to flash the light into every corner of the small room. That squat figure, that ungraceful walk; Jack recognised him at once. Notwithstanding the sombrero, the long cloak, the silence observed by the man, his prisoner at once saluted him by name.

“So this is how you keep your prisoners, Don Hypolito Xuarez?”

Xuarez started at being thus recognised so speedily, but restraining his speech, flashed the lantern up and down Jack’s tall figure as he leaned against the wall, and started again.

“Carambo! You are free! The chains—”

“Are there, Señor!”

The rebel leader looked first at the broken chains afterwards at Jack, and seemed to regard his prisoner as a kind of Samson. He had a profound respect for physical strength, for physical beauty; and the splendid frame of the young Englishman, in conjunction with this evidence of his muscles, inspired Don Hypolito with great admiration.

“Bueno, Señor Duval!” he said, in the frank tone of a man who cherishes no animosity, “you are a difficult person to deal with. You have broken your chains! Had I not arrived thus opportunely, you might by this time have broken out of prison.”

“It’s not impossible, Señor,” replied Jack, coolly. “You may be certain I would not have sat down much longer doing nothing. But now—”

“You are thinking of making use of my presence here to facilitate your escape. Is it not so, mi amigo? If you are wise, do not try. You may knock me down—I am but a dwarf beside you! You may steal these keys, this lantern; but you know not the palace, you know not the guards, and, above all, even if you did get free, you could not escape from Acauhtzin. No, mi amigo! Here you are! here you stay, unless you agree to my conditions.”

“Conditions!” echoed Jack, scornfully. “I think I can guess what those conditions are, Señor Xuarez.”

“Bueno! Then I can save my breath,” replied Don Hypolito, setting down the lantern. “If you know the conditions of your release, you also know whether to accept them or not! Speak plainly, mi amigo!”

“Don Hypolito,” observed Jack, not answering this question directly, “I do not know whether to regard you as a knave or a fool. You must be the former, else you had not betrayed me and my friends. You are the latter, or you would not ask me to agree to certain conditions which you know are quite impossible—with me?”

“You have the great merit, Señor Duval, of candour. I admire it as a virtue, but it can be carried too far. I do not like being called knave or fool, as I deserve neither name.”

“Is that so? Good! I say you are both! However, I am open to argument; so let me hear your side of the question.”

Don Hypolito laughed quietly, and eyed his rival with increased respect.

“I wish you were on my side, Don Juan. A man such as you would be invaluable to me.”

“I thank you for your good opinion, Señor; but I am not on your side, neither am I likely to be. I support the established Government of Cholacaca.”

“You are a—but no,” said Xuarez, checking himself with a sardonic smile; “we have no time to discuss politics. All are against me now, but when I am seated in the presidential chair, the world will be in my favour. To-day, Señor, I am an adventurer. To-morrow I will be a conqueror. Success is everything in the eyes of the world. However, we need not talk of these things which do not interest you. I notice you have not yet asked after your friends.”

“Why should I, Don Hypolito?” replied Jack, determined to show no signs of anxiety in the presence of this man. “I know that my friends are safe, and are at present on their way to Tlatonac.”

“It is true, but how did you guess this much, Don Juan?”

“From what I know of your character.”

“Pardon me, Señor, no one knows my character,” said Xuarez, quietly.

“Not your real character, perhaps, but the character by which you choose to be known to the world.”

The nonchalance of the young Englishman somewhat puzzled Xuarez. Here was a man talking quietly with one whom he had every reason to hate and dread. Wounded as he was, incarcerated in a gloomy cell; in doubt as to the safety of his friends, the whereabouts of his sweetheart—Jack had yet sufficient pluck to conceal his real feelings, and play a part which entirely deceived even so acute an observer of human nature as Don Hypolito. He saw that Jack was purposely holding himself back instead of giving way to his righteous indignation, but while admiring the self-restraint of the young man, he was doubtful as to the meaning of such diplomatic conduct.

Experience had taught Don Hypolito that the only way to fathom the feelings of others was to make them talk freely, listen attentively, and draw conclusions from chance observations. This method he now applied to Jack, and asked him to proceed in a grave tone of voice, all the time keeping his ears open to find out the underlying meaning of this impassive demeanour. He discovered nothing, because there was nothing to discover. Jack spoke truthfully and bluntly, giving voice to his real feelings, and Xuarez, accustomed to double dealing, to double meaning, was for once in his life utterly at fault.

“You have started this war, Señor,” said Jack with painful candour, “entirely for your own ends. The excuse you make is that Gomez has broken the constitution of Cholocaca. This is false, as you know well. However, it is a good excuse upon which to work out your aims. In this war you wish the civilised world to be on your side—to look upon you as a great man, fitted to be the saviour of Cholocaca from a tyrannical Government. To this end you dare not act violently towards any representative nation of the civilised world. England is a representative nation, and you to-day saluted her flag. You respected the ambassadors from the Junta because they were accompanied by Englishmen, because they came here on an English ship. One of those men whom you thus respected is the war correspondent of a London paper, and you wished him to write home to his journal narrating the courtesy of Don Hypolito Xuarez, and thus interesting our nation’s feelings in your favour. The attack made by the mob was, I firmly believe, made without your sanction. You wished the embassy to depart in safety, and they so departed. One man, however, you desired to detain, because he was your rival in the affections of a woman. That man is myself! So you made use of the riot to have me knocked down in the fight, and taken here to prison. Now that you think I am worn out with wounds, thirst, and imprisonment, you come to offer me my liberty on two conditions. First, that I surrender all right to the hand of Doña Dolores. Second, that I leave Cholocaca for ever. These, Señor Xuarez, are your motives in acting as you have done, dictated, as I said before, not, perhaps, by your real character, but by the noble character in which you wish to appear to the world.”

Don Hypolito listened to this long speech with rapt attention, and could not help admiring the way in which the young man had fathomed his motives. When Jack ended, he raised his head and proceeded to lie—uselessly, as it afterwards proved—still he lied.

“In a great measure, what you say is correct, Don Juan. I do wish to stand well with the nations, of Europe, because I believe my cause to be a just one. Gomez was elected President by the aristocrats, not by the people. I believe in democracy. He governs so as to throw the whole power of the state into the hands of those who would take away the liberties of the people, won so gloriously by Zuloaga. You say I have begun this war from a personal ambition. That may be so. I wish to be Dictator—Supreme Dictator of the Republic, and to raise her to her rightful position as a power in the world. These, Señor, are political and personal questions. They need not be discussed. What you say about the embassy is true. Had the boat of Señor Felipe entered the harbour under the opal flag, I would have ordered the fort guns to sink her for such audacity. She however carried the English ensign. I respected that ensign; I received the deputation; I

heard the insolent demand of the Junta, and gave my answer. They were free to depart without hindrance from me. The outbreak of the mob was solely due to the message sent. I did not create the riot. I did not make use of the tumult to get you into my power. But when in the mêlée you were stunned, my soldiers carried you off to the Palacio Nacional. I saw an opportunity of gaining my ends by thus having you in my power, and so put you in this prison. Now I come to make my terms. Accept them, and you are free. Refuse, and a terrible fate will befall you!”

“To remain in prison here, I suppose?” said Jack, contemptuously.

“No; worse!”

“What, would you kill me?”

“I will not harm a hair of your head. What your fate will be I refuse to tell you; but if you are a wise man you will accept my offer of freedom.”

“And accept your conditions also. The conditions being those I have stated?”

“Precisely! You have rare penetration, Don Juan! My conditions are as you have guessed. Give up Doña Dolores! leave Cholocaca, and you are free.”

“I refuse.”

“Think well, Señor,” said Xuarez, coldly. “I am not a man to threaten in vain. Your fate will be a terrible one.”

“I quite believe you capable of any enormity, Don Hypolito,” retorted Jack, with a curling lip; “but why waste any more time over the matter? I refuse!”

“On what grounds?”

“On what grounds?” reiterated Jack, in a haughty tone. “Simply that it does not suit my convenience either to give up Doña Dolores or to leave Cholocaca at your bidding.”

Xuarez was nettled at Jack’s elaborately insulting manner; but he did not lose his temper. He was too clever a man to do that. With a sudden change of front, he took a hint from card-players, and tried to force Jack’s hand.

“You love Doña Dolores?”

“That is not a question for you to ask.”

“Pardon me, Señor; I also love Doña Dolores, therefore I am interested in your reply.”

“Are you?” said Jack, facing his questioner sharply; “then you shall have it. I do love Doña Dolores; and, what is more, she returns that love. One person only will she marry, and that person is myself, John Duval!”

“You will never marry her!” exclaimed Xuarez, vehemently. “She is mine!—mine! Before a month is gone, she becomes my wife!”

“Ah!” sneered Jack, with a world of meaning in his tone, “I knew you lied when you said she was not in Acauhtzin.”

“Carrai!” cried Don Hypolito, who was beginning to lose his temper; “I did not lie. She is not in Acauhtzin. She is—”

“Where?” asked Duval, impetuously.

“In a place you will never discover, Señor. Not that it matters much, for, in any case, you will not marry her. No! You are reserved for a worse fate!—a fate which will bitterly punish you for daring to be my rival.”

“I am not a child, to be frightened of big words,” said Jack, scornfully, though his heart quailed at the deadly menace of the Mestizo’s tones. “My friends know I am in Acauhtzin. They will come back for me.”

“They have already tried to do so,” retorted Xuarez, triumphantly. “When they left the harbour, I suppose they discovered you were left behind. The boat returned; but a few shot from the forts, and the war-ships made her retreat, and when I last saw her she was steaming full speed for Tlatonac.”

“Yes? I knew as much. To bring back an army to level Acauhtzin to the ground. To capture you! to rescue me!”

“No one can rescue you!” replied Xuarez, in a sombre tone. “Your only chance of escape is to give up Doña Dolores!”

“To you! to you!” cried Jack, fiercely. “You who love her not for herself, but because she is the guardian of the opal stone! Ah, yes, Señor Xuarez! I know well what you design. You wish to marry Dolores—to secure the opal stone, to gain over the Indians to your cause. All ambition; there is no love. I tell you, Señor, such a thing can never be. Dolores would sooner die than give herself up to a villain like yourself. You will never possess Dolores—you will never be master of the Chalchuih Tlatonac! Turn your ambitions to other things, Don Hypolito. Dolores is not for you!”

Don Hypolito sprang to his feet with a cry of rage. Hitherto he had restrained himself in a most admirable manner; but now the insulting speeches of his prisoner proved too much for even his well-trained temper. A torrent of passion swept away all his reserve, and he burst out into a furious speech.

“Dolores *is* for me! She will be mine in another week or so. She is the guardian of the opal, and that also will be mine. When I am possessed of the devil stone, the Indians will flock round my standard. I have the fleet, I have an army, I will have the Indians, too, my allies, guided by the devil stone. That, also, will be mine, and Dolores with it. I will become Dictator of Cholocaca. I will raise her to a pinnacle of power. She will rule the South—nay, the North also. Mexico, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Guatemala, they will all be mine. In the North, the United States; in the South, the Empire of the Opal, with myself as Ruler. It is a grand—”

“Dream!” interrupted Jack, faintly, for the pain of his wound was telling on his frame. “It is a dream! a dream!”

“It is no dream! Or, if a dream, it will soon turn out a reality. And you—you low-born Englishman, would dare to bar my way to this fame. Lie there, Señor, and wait my commands. You will die, and by a death which will break even your spirit. You will die and be forgotten, while I, Hypolito Xuarez, will reconstruct on this continent the Empire of Montezuma!”

He spoke to deaf ears, for, overcome by fatigue and pain, Duval had fainted. Xuarez bent over him, and held the lantern to his face. It was deadly pale, and the eyes were closed.

“I do not want him to die,” muttered the remorseless Mestizo, going towards the door. “I shall send a doctor to look after his wound. He shall be made whole again, but only to perish in tortures. Not for you, Don Juan, is Dolores; not for you the opal, but death and dishonour. You fall! I rise! My star quenches yours in its burning splendour.”

In another moment he had quitted the prison, leaving his rival stretched out in the darkness, to all appearances lifeless and lost.

Chapter XVII In Shadowland

Weary body, aching brain,
Tortured mind, and heavy soul,
Fourfold being, one existence!
Life with troublous insistence,
To ye brings but constant dole,
Ceaseless weeping, endless pain;
Yet is all this sorrow vain
When the waves of slumber roll
Over body, over soul.
In such slumber should ye list, hence
Flies the spirit to attain
That far land of dreams and stories,
Misty realms of airy glories,
Where the body hath no being,
Nor the eyes an earthly seeing
And the mind makes no resistance
To events which overleap
Nature's laws, which bind existence;
From our sphere the spirit fleeing
Dwells but in the realm of sleep.

After that extraordinary interview with Don Hypolito in the prison, Jack ceased to take any interest in earthly matters, and went for a space into shadow-land. He was not dead, but delirious. As a captive balloon is anchored to earth, so Jack's soul had flown into the realms of dream, yet was held to his body by a small amount of life.

Yet curiously enough he retained a dull impression of earthly events. All things actually done to his body coloured his dreams and decided his visions. As the fancies of the sleepers are determined by external actions, so as through a veil the wounded man faintly perceived the every-day life going on around his inert body. Through the chain extending from body to soul which held the latter captive to earth passed the thrills hinting at corporeal-existence, and these dominating his spirituality whirled him hither and thither, according as they happened. We in health feel in slumber the power of the unseen world guiding our every action; this man, in sickness dwelt, spiritually speaking, in the world of shadows, whereof we have no knowledge, and therefrom felt rather than saw the happening of earthly events which coloured his ghostly being.

Oh those dreams, those visions apocalyptic, what agonies, what ecstasies, what feelings did they not beget? Now of earth, now of heaven, frequently of hell. Years afterwards, Jack remembering portions of these fantasies, would shudder and turn pale at the mere thought of having endured them. Wild as the visions of Ezekiel, gorgeous as the Arabian Nights, hideous as De Quincey's dreamings, delicate and spiritual as the songs of Aerial, those chimeras, at once terrible and fascinating, racked his spiritual being with the pangs of pleasure and pain. As thus:—

... Darkness! the infinite darkness of chaos, before the light-creating word was spoken by the Deity. Ages and ages and ages of gloom, of horror, of thick opacity. No light, no glimmer, no glow to break this all-pervading blackness. No earth beneath, no sky above, nothing but clinging gloom on all sides. So chill, so freezing—surely hell were not more terrible....

Ha! a burst of light penetrating the gloom. The word is spoken, the light is here.... Day divides itself from night ... from the womb of the darkness springs the faint radiance of dawn. Then the sun, the glorious sun, rises like a god to conquer the foul fiends of shadow. See how his arrows fly, golden and swift, from his never-empty bow ... east, west, north, south ... and the glory of light spreads over all creation.... I am borne along on the wings of a mighty wind blown from the gates of the dawn ... faster and faster and faster.... I swim through the crystalline air.... I poise myself like a bird in the opaline glories of a whirling sphere.... In the heart of the rainbow ... still no earth ... but air and the coruscation of infinite colours—red and yellow and green and blue.... They swirl in circles, they shoot on all sides from a spot of brilliance as the spokes of a wheel.... They range themselves in lines of ever-changing hues ... and now I am blown resistlessly onward by that mighty wind....

The sea! gloom once more! I can see nothing but darkness, yet penetrated by faint gleams of light.... The wash of many waves break on my ears.... Overhead a sky veiled in clouds, beneath the black breast of ocean, heaving restlessly in white lines of foam.... I smell the salt brine of the ocean.... The keen wind lashes my face as with a whip.... Ho! yeo, ho!... the sailors are at work.... Hark! the throb of a heart. Beat! beat! beat! beat! It is the beating of the propeller blades now striking the water ... I am in the engine-room ... the pistons slide silently in and out of the cylinders.... Now the giant cranks rise and fall with monotonous motion ... and yon gleaming steel shaft, revolving rapidly, turns the screw in the dark waters without ... the hiss of escaping steam ... the whirling of wheels ... the sudden burst of red flame from the furnace ... I am carried across the ocean ... whither?

Earth! at last the land.... Mother of all things, I salute thee ... this bleak beach on which dash the waves ... the soft odour of the wind sways the trees on yonder promontory.... I hear the measured dip of oars ... the grating of the boat's keel on the stones.... Ha! I am in the hands of demons ... their eyes glare as they lift me from boat to litter.... The curtains are dropped, and I feel the swing and sway of the litter being carried up steep heights....

This is a primeval forest ... green as the sea ... scarcely so restless ... the warm wind stirs the giant branches ... what crowded hues ... and lo! the flash of brilliant flowers ... the odour of spices.... Brilliant birds flit from branch to branch like flying gems.... I hear the singing of choirs invisible ... the birds!... Yes, birds only.... Garlands of flowers trail from the trees ... beneath their shadow the grass is crowded with blossoms ... wherever I step a flower springs to being ... those pools of still water blue as turquoise ... the Indian conjurer!... I see him hiding amid the frondage ... look!... the saurian!... Oh, the frightful monster.... Preadamite!... begotten in chaos slime.... Trees! trees! trees without end.... The earth is one vast forest, and I alone wander therein....

Snow!... a vast expanse of snow ... for miles and leagues.... No! it is salt lying in thin flakes on the brown earth ... the surface glitters in the moonlight as if it were ice.... Far and wide whirl thin white pillars of salt in the grip of the wind.... Lot's wife! Ha! Ha! Nay, no woman do I see, but salt on all hands ... like snow ... and moon freezing crystals....

The forest again ... more trees ... birds ... odours.... Hark! a song ... 'tis the dancing-girls who sing ... I heard them call ... I see them shake their anklets of gold ... the cymbals crash ... the trinkets shine. Can you not hear the roll of the serpent-skin drums?...

Oh, this interminable avenue of stone gods ... on either side the faces of solemn sphinxes.... I am in Egypt ... I go up to offer sacrifice to the god Thoth ... lines of sphinxes ... statues of kings with their hands placed on their knees ... then this great flight of steps.... Up, and up and up.... Are we going to heaven?... I will bow down to my God.... Horror! Huitzilopochtli.... This is not my God.... I sacrifice to Thoth.... To Isis.... Ah, you would make of me the victim.... Oh, foul priest, knife in hand ... the stone of the sacrifice ... you raise the obsidian knife ... Again the chant of the priests ... the light clash of the dancing-girls' anklets ... drums ... cymbals and death....

I am in the tomb ... yes; fold my hands on my breast, for I have done with life ... straight and white I lie, with cerements swathing my form ... this is a king's tomb ... these walls are painted with many colours ... yonder are gods and kings and heroes walking in long files ... here they sacrifice to their god ... there they lead captive trains of prisoners.... A splendid tomb, but the roof crushes me down ... oh, Heaven! can those pillars, those caryatides support the cyclopean architecture?... It will fall and crush me, like Samson.... Yes, I thirst! I am dead, but I thirst.... Dives in hell ... give me....

... What! a woman's face?... I have seen that face before ... those dark eyes, that smiling mouth ... it is thou! Dolores! Oh, my heart's best love, I again find you,—in the tomb?... we have done with life ... then we were divided; but Death, more merciful, has joined us again.... Place your cool white hand on my brow ... it burns ... it burns.... No, no! do not leave me ... oh, I see you fade in the darkness like a vision ... and this phantom which rises between us?... Oh, Xuarez! liar! thief! murderer!... thus do I slay thee!... So weak; so weary; I know nothing ... where am I?... what am I?... whither have my visions fled?... I am dead! not in hell, nor heaven ... but where? I know not ... I am dead ... you, Dolores ... you, Xuarez ... you all, dreams.... I lie here dead and still ... in my ear the chant of a slave.... Could I only turn my head ... ah! the slave rises ... he bends over me.... Cocom!...

"Yes, Señor, it is Cocom," said a well-known voice, as a gentle hand skilfully adjusted the bandages.

"Cocom!" repeated Jack, in a weak voice. "Am I dead? Do I dream? Am I dead?"

"No, Señor Juan. You were nearly dead, and for days you have dreamed of many things. Now you are better, and will live."

"Still on earth?"

"Yes, Don Juan. Still do you live, thanks be to the gods. Teoyamiqui has not yet brought you to her kingdom. Now, lie you still, Señor. So! Drink this, and speak not; you are so weak."

Jack raised his head from the pillow, and greedily drank the contents of the cup held to his lips by Cocom. Then he closed his eyes, and fell into a refreshing sleep, while the old Indian sat quietly by the side of the couch, muttering some strange old song of a forgotten civilisation. Now and then a form would glide into the room and look at Jack sleeping in the bed, so still, so deathlike. Sometimes a man, more often a woman, and ever beside the couch sat the stolid Cocom, watching the face of his patient with intense interest.

How long he slept thus Jack did not know, but when he woke from a refreshing slumber all his delirium had departed. He felt weak, truly, but clear-headed and calm in his mind. Opening his eyes, he listened vaguely to the murmuring song of his attendant, and thought over the events which had preceded his illness. The entry into Acaultzin; the dismissal of the deputation at the Palacio Nacional; the fight at the

sea-gate; the interview in prison with Don Hypolito; and then utter blankness. He remembered fainting in the cell at Acauhtzin, and now he had wakened—where? With an effort he raised his head and looked round him.

In his delirium he had thought he was in a tomb, and truly the room wherein he now found himself was not unlike one of those strange Egyptian sepulchres, houses of the dead, wherein the highest art of that sombre civilisation was displayed. This low roof, formed of Titanic masses of stone; these heavy walls, gaudy with mural paintings, representing gods, kings, heroes strange sacrifices, and mystical ceremonies; all were redolent of the land of the Nile. Through a narrow slit in the wall filtered a pale light; skins of jaguar and puma carpeted the stone floor; rich coverlets of featherwork lay over the couch, and the entrance was draped with gaudy tapestries, dyed with confused tints, hinting at barbaric art. Jack, for the moment, thought he was indeed in Egypt, when, suddenly, at the side of the room he saw the hideous image of Huitzilopochtli, and heard the monotonous chant of his Watcher. Then, his true situation came vividly to his mind; this was a room in some Indian dwelling, yonder was the fierce god of the Aztecs, and by his bedside knelt Cocom.

“Where am I?” asked the young man, raising himself on his elbow, and looking at the Indian with a puzzled expression of countenance.

“In good hands, Señor,” was the evasive answer.

“Yes, yes! I know that. But am I still in Acauhtzin?”

“No. You are many miles from Acauhtzin.”

“But I was there last night.”

Cocom shook his head, and, producing a cigarette, lighted it carefully, blew some smoke through his nostrils, and looked steadily at Jack with his melancholy eyes.

“You were there five days ago, Señor.”

“What do you mean, Cocom?”

“Ah! the Señor forgets that he has been ill. For five days he has been in the land of everlasting darkness. Cocom has watched many hours by this couch and listened to the crying of the Señor. You have seen visions and heard voices, Don Juan. On the borders of Teoyamiqui’s land have you been, yet not within her kingdom. But Cocom knows many things, and by his art has cheated the goddess of one Americano. You are out of danger now, Señor, and I, Cocom, have cured you.”

“Mucha gracias!” murmured Jack, patting the Indian on the shoulder with a weak hand; “but tell me where I am now.”

“Where does your memory fail, Don Juan?”

Jack passed his hand across his brow. The confusion of his brain had departed. His senses were clear now, and he could recall everything up to a certain point.

“I remember the embassy from Tlatonac to Acauhtzin—the fight at the sea-gate. There I was struck down, and recovered my senses in prison. With Don Hypolito I held a long conversation, and, I suppose, fainted with his voice still in my ears. I wake here at a place you tell me is far from Acauhtzin, and find you by my side—you, Cocom, whom I supposed to be at Tlatonac!”

“Listen, Don Juan,” said Cocom, with great deliberation. “I will tell you many things that have taken place since your soul was in the realm of shadows. When you became insensible at Acauhtzin, a doctor was sent to attend to you by Don Hypolito. That doctor did what he could for you, but thought you would die as your soul was not within your body. Wildly did you cry, Don Juan, and many strange things did you say. Then, by the order of Don Hypolito, you were carried away on board a war-ship down the coast. At a certain point your body was taken ashore in a boat, and there delivered to certain people, who expected your coming. Having been placed on a litter, you were carried through the forest, across the salt desert, and again through the forest till you were placed on that bed. For two days have you tossed and turned, and cried, and fought. But now you are well, Don Juan—you will live; thanks be to the gods.”

Jack listened to all this as in a dream. The explanation fitted in with those vague visions which had haunted his delirious brain. The darkness—that was the cell at Acauhtzin; the light came when he was carried on board the war-ship. Then the sea-vision, the landing on the coast—that mirage of a tropical forest—the snowy plains of salt, and the climbing of many steps up to an antique temple. A sudden thrill shot through his enfeebled frame as he recalled the vision of the sacrifice, he recollected Cocom’s last words referring to the gods, he glanced terrified at the frightful image of Huitzilopochtli, and turning slowly towards the Indian, repeated his often-asked question, the answer to which he already guessed.

“What is this place?”

Cocom arose to his feet, drew himself up to his full height, and pointed majestically towards the idol.

“The temple of Huitzilopochtli! The shrine of the Chalchuih Tlatonac.”

“God!” cried Jack, in despair, as he recognised his position. “I am lost!”

He saw his peril at a glance. The threats of Don Hypolito regarding a frightful death were not mere words. With devilish ingenuity he had secured the death of his rival, with no possible chance of the truth becoming known. Jack saw that Xuarez had preserved his life, had delivered him to the Indians, to the end that he might be offered up on the altar of the war-god, as a sacrifice to the opal. No wonder his usually brave heart quailed at the prospect of such horrors. Captive to remorseless savages, in the heart of an impenetrable forest, there was no chance of a rescue by his friends. He was weak, unarmed, unfriended, in the power of a fanatic race; there was no help for it—he must die.

“Cocom,” whispered Jack, clutching the Indian’s arm, “why have I been brought here—why did Don Hypolito deliver me to the Indians? Is it for—for—”

His dry lips refused to form the horrible word; but Cocom, without the least emotion, supplied it.

“For sacrifice! Yes, Don Juan; you are to be offered to the god.”

“Horrible! When?”

“In three weeks. At the termination of the great cycle.”

“What do you mean?” asked Jack, with a shudder.

“Our time,” explained Cocom, with stolid apathy, “is divided into cycles of fifty-two years. This have we received from our Aztec ancestors. At the end of a cycle the sun will die out in the heavens, and the earth end, if the new fire is not lighted on the altars of the gods. When the last day of the cycle comes, you, Don Juan, will be bound on the stone of sacrifice, your heart will be taken out as an offering to the great gods,

and on your breast will the new fire be lighted. Then will the sun rise again, and a new cycle begin for the earth. The gods will be appeased, and mankind will be saved.”

Jack had read of this terrible superstition in the fascinating pages of Prescott, but he never expected that he would one day take an active part in such a ceremony. With the hope of despair he endeavoured to evade his doom.

“But the body of a white man will not please the gods. Why not sacrifice as your ancestors did, on the Hill of the Star?”

“Hitherto, Señor, that has been done. Now, however, the gods have spoken through the opal, and it is willed that a white man alone can avert the end of time. A white man must be sacrificed, and you are chosen.”

Jack shuddered, and hid his face in his hands.

“Surely, Señor, you are not afraid!”

“Afraid!” echoed Jack, uncovering his face, with a frown. “No, Cocom; an Englishman is never afraid of death. But to come in such a form as this—oh, horrible! horrible!”

Cocom could not understand this alarm. Like all Indians, he regarded death with stoical resignation, and would have been perfectly willing himself to have been offered on the altar of sacrifice, seeing such a death would admit him at once into the Paradise of the sun. But he was very old, and therefore useless. The gods demanded a man, handsome, young, in the flower of his age, and therefore was it certain that Jack would be acceptable to the bloodthirsty Huitzilopochtli.

“Did Don Hypolito know this when he delivered me to your friends?”

“It was for that purpose he delivered you, Señor.”

“Oh, fiend! devil!” cried Jack, trying to rise in his bed. “I wish I had my fingers round his throat!”

“Lie quiet, Señor,” said Cocom, forcing him back. “You will make yourself ill again.”

“Why should I not, seeing I am only reserved for this frightful death?”

“That is as it may be, Señor,” observed Cocom, significantly.

“What do you mean?” asked Duval, with sudden hope.

“Hush!” replied the old man, laying his finger on his lips, and glancing apprehensively around. “In this temple the very walls have ears.”

“You can save me?”

“Perhaps. I know not.”

“But—”

Cocom bent over Jack on the pretence of arranging the bed-clothes, and brought his lips close to the young man's ear.

"Say not a word, Señor. If the priests suspect me, you are lost. I come hither as my fathers came before me, but I worship not the devil-stone. I am a true Catholic, Señor. The priests wanted a victim, and asked me to betray to them Don Pedro, when he was with me beyond the walls. Then I refused, and said I could not do so. The end of the cycle approaches, and the priests were alarmed, so they sent to Don Hypolito, and promised to make all the Indians help him in his war, if he procured them a white man for a victim to the gods. Don Hypolito promised, and two days ago sent you."

"The fiends!"

"Hush! I am a medicine-man, placed here by the priests to cure you; but they think I wish to see you sacrificed. I do not. I will save you."

"Oh, Cocom, I thank you."

"Are you mad, Señor?" whispered the Indian, thrusting him hurriedly back; "eyes may be on us now. The walls of this room are pierced with secret eye-places."

Jack recognised the wisdom of this reasoning, and sank back on his couch. It was just as well he did so, for at that very moment the drapery of the door was swept aside, and a man entered the room.

He was a majestic-looking personage, much taller than the average Indian. Indeed, he was as huge as Tim himself, but not so bulky. He wore a long white robe, falling to his feet, over this a mantle of gaudy leather-work. On his head was set a fresh chaplet of flowers, on his breast burned the red glimmer of a small opal. Advancing into the middle of the room, he swung a small incense-burner before Jack, throwing therein some odoriferous gum, which made a thick, perfumed smoke. After this, he cast some flowers on the couch, and muttered a few words with uplifted hands, finally ending the ceremony by falling on his knees.

"What does this mean?" asked Jack of Cocom, who stood reverently on one side, observing all this mummary.

"Hush, Señor! He adores you as a god."

"Devil take him and his worship," muttered Jack, crossly, in English. Then the priest spoke in the Indian tongue, and Cocom translated his speech to Jack.

"Is my lord better in health?" asked the priest.

"Tell him I am; but I don't care about being preserved for sacrifice."

"Speak not so, Don Juan," said Cocom, in Spanish, with a look of alarm; "you are not supposed to know anything of that. I told you on the peril of my life."

"Then tell him whatever lies you please!" said Duval, viciously, and, rolling over, turned his back on the priest.

"A bad sign!" murmured the priest, looking anxiously at Cocom. "Is my lord angered?"

“Nay,” replied Cocom, in the Indian tongue; “my lord is much improved in health, oh, Ixtlilxochitl; but as with all who are ill at ease, he is fretful and wanting in courtesy.”

“It is true,” replied Ixtlilxochitl, reverently. “The sick are ever foolish. See that thou make him strong, Cocom, for the gods accept naught but blooming health.”

“Oh, my sacred lord; he will be cured in two days from now. Cocom knows of magic herbs whereby the favourite of Huitzilopochtli can be made whole. Let Ixtlilxochitl be content, my lord will be pure and strong for the sacrifice.”

“It is well,” said the priest, rising from his knees. “I will leave my lord to his sleep; but will he not vouchsafe one glance at his servant?”

Instructed by Cocom, Jack was forced to turn round and smile at the priest, who knelt down to receive this mark of favour. Then he adored Jack with more incense and flowers, after which he withdrew with reverent genuflections.

“The old fiend!” muttered Jack, when the drapery had again veiled the door. “I should like to have sent a boot at his head.”

“Hush, my lord Juan.”

“Carrai! why should I? That devil-monkey does not understand Spanish.”

“No, Señor. Still, it is wiser to risk nothing.”

“You are quite right, Cocom. I place myself entirely in your hands. Save me, and I promise you I shall not forget you.”

“Cocom will save you, for the sake of Don Miguel,” said the old man, proudly; “and for the sake of the lady Dolores.”

“Dolores!” repeated Jack, eagerly. “Do you know where she is?”

“I know nothing at present,” replied Cocom, with a meaning glance. “Possess your soul in patience, Don Juan; all will yet be well. Don Hypolito desires to kill you, and wed Doña Dolores. He shall do neither. Santissima Virgen, I swear it. Be silent! No words, my lord. Rest now, and sleep. You will need all your strength.”

“For the sacrifice?”

“Nay, Señor, for escape!”

Chapter XVIII

The Shrine Of The Opal

Lord of the humming-bird's foot!

Behold thy worshippers rising and falling in adoration before thee, as
rise and fall the restless waves of the far-reaching ocean.

These thousands gathered from the ends of the earth, are thine, and
thine only.

We see thine image bedecked with jewels, shine like the sun at his
 rising
Before thee, the stone, whereon the favoured one yields up his life for
 thy glory.
Smoking hearts dost thou love, the savour of blood, the carnage
 of battle.
For thou art god of war, death alone is the way to thy favour.
Spins before thee that precious stone by which thou tellest thy wishes,
That shining, precious stone, which now burns red as the blood of
 thine altars,
Crimson it gleams, hinting war! War is the fate of the future!
Oh, mighty one! Lord of the humming-bird's foot! We pray thee
 give order,
That the red war light melt soon to the azure of peace,
Then will fresh victims be thine, and happiness ours,
Shout, ye people! ask peace from the lord of the humming-bird's foot.

In two days, Jack was comparatively well, and able to move about without much trouble. This almost miraculous cure was effected by Cocom through the medium of some medicinal herbs, the curative powers of which were known to him alone. Out of these he made two decoctions, one for internal, the other for external application. With the latter he bathed the wound on Jack's head, and made him drink quantities of the former every two hours. The effect was wonderfully rapid, and Jack soon found himself gaining strength. In the hands of a European doctor, he would probably have been laid up for weeks; but the rude medicine of the Indian set him on his legs in no time. The wound on his head gave him no trouble, and healed with great quickness; a fact which Jack put down as much to his healthy blood, and simple living, as to Cocom's physicing.

With renewed health and strength came a stronger desire to escape from the horrible fate which waited him in a few weeks. When he went out, however, and explored the strange city, in the centre of which stood the shrine of the opal, Jack saw plainly that it would be madness to attempt flight without the assistance of Cocom. The Indians apparently knew this, for, treated by them more as a guest than a prisoner, he was permitted to wander freely round the neighbourhood. Still, did he venture too far in the direction of the belt of timber surrounding the city, he was always followed by two or more native guards; these, when he once more returned to the city, quietly left him. From this espionage he plainly saw that his roaming was restricted, but not in such a measure as to cause him any unpleasant feeling.

As regards the behaviour of the Indians, Jack had nothing to complain of. Indeed, they could scarcely have been more deferential. Regarded as a kind of deity, his appearance was the signal for the most slavish adulation. The Indians, of whom there were a goodly number in the vicinity, threw themselves on their faces before him, as he walked abroad, attended by Cocom. If he seated himself, they strewed flowers at his feet, and swung censers, fragrant with copal, until he was almost hidden by white wreaths of perfumed smoke. This popularity was not unpleasant; but, as Jack knew it was but a prelude to the sacrificial stone, he was anything but gratified at thus being continually reminded of the dangerous position in which he stood.

On recovering his health, Jack found Cocom much more reticent than when he was acting as doctor. Several times had he been on the point of making some important communication, but always stopped short and refused to speak further. Jack supposed this caution was on account of the priests, who, despite the deference of their demeanour, kept a close watch on his actions, and on those of Cocom. The high priest, Ixtlilxochitl, was a mild-looking old man, who treated Jack in a most courteous manner, and frequently expressed his pleasure that the white lord had so soon recovered his health. Such inquiries would have been much more acceptable had not the recipient known that they were but the outcome of

Ixtlilxochitl's desire that he should be in good condition for the sacrifice. It was no pleasant thing for Duval to know that these courtesies came from an old gentleman who was anxiously looking forward to taking his life.

Under these circumstances, Jack did not wonder that Cocom was cautious, and though for the moment the attitude of the old Indian appeared anything but friendly, Jack quite relied on him to aid his escape. He was anxious to escape from this buried city, where he was threatened with so terrible a fate; he was longing to return to Tlatonac for the purpose of reassuring his friends, who he knew would be terribly put out by his disappearance at Acauhtzin; and, above all, he was anxious to be free so as to search for Dolores.

In Jack's opinion she was at Acauhtzin, as a man so vile as Don Hypolito could no longer be believed. If she was not in the power of the rebel leader, she would have been with the Indians. Yet here was Jack in the very heart of this aboriginal civilisation, in the stronghold of the opal, yet he neither saw her nor heard anything of her. He questioned Cocom, but that wily old man replied that he knew nothing, and as Don Hypolito had admitted that he knew where she was, Jack felt sure that the poor girl was held a prisoner by the Mestizo at Acauhtzin. He was therefore anxious to escape, and get back to Tlatonac, for the purpose of urging on the war with all possible speed, so that the northern capital should be invested within a reasonable time, and Dolores rescued from her terrible position. Consequently, escape was his one aim; but he saw plainly that without assistance it would be impossible to leave this city of the opal, buried as it was in the savage solitudes of primeval forests.

That this famous opal shrine was in Cholacaca he knew perfectly well, but as he had been brought hither in an unconscious state, he was quite at a loss to lay his finger on the precise locality. Cholacaca, east to west, was two hundred miles from mountains to sea, so the city of the opal could not be situated out of this radius. It might be fifty, a hundred, a hundred and fifty miles from the sea, and Jack, knowing by his pocket-compass in which direction to go, calculated that if he marched due east he could not fail to reach the coast. Once there, and he could soon pick up a canoe or some light boat, in which he could get in due time to Tlatonac.

But to start for the coast without knowing the geography of the country was sheer madness, and Jack stamped his foot with rage as he thought of the miles of trackless forest which lay between him and freedom. To push one's way through a virgin forest is difficult in any case, but to make the attempt without arms, companions, food, and guides was quite an impossibility. That there was some secret way to the coast was plain, as the Indians came hither to this shrine from Tlatonac; but that way was known only to the priests. Within a certain distance, every new-comer was blinded with a bandage, and this was taken off in the square, before the principal teocalli. The worshippers were conducted into the forests with the same precautions; so, unless he could bribe a priest to show him the secret way, Jack foresaw absolutely no chance of gaining his freedom.

It was a buried city, but not a ruined city, for here the aboriginal civilisation flourished greatly, as it had done before the coming of the Spaniards, to Anahuac. Situated in a hollow cup, on all sides arose verdant forests of bright green, clothing the base of great mountains, which showed their serrated peaks above the vegetation. On three sides the city was shut in by these giant barriers, but towards the west opened a rugged cañon, through which flowed a noisy stream. A road ran along the west side of this freak of nature, cut out of the solid rock, so narrow as to allow only three men to walk abreast. Above and below were the cliffs, thousands of feet in height and depth. No foe could enter the city by that pass, which led into the great mountains of the interior continent; but no foe would wish to enter, for this city was holy ground, the Mecca of the aborigines, and had preserved its inviolability from an invasion for centuries.

“It was built by the Toltecs, Señor,” said Cocom, who acted as Jack’s cicerone. “Ages ago, you must know, this race came hither from the North. It was they who built the great cities of Yucatan in the dark past. Uxmal, Aké, Chichen-Itza. They reared them all. A glorious race were my ancestors, Señor.”

“But you are not a descendant of the Toltecs, Cocom?”

“No, Señor, I am a Maya. My ancestors ruled at Mayapan. See,” added the Indian, plucking a yellow flower sprouting out from a crevice close at hand, “this is the plant Cocom—my name, Señor, and that of the great kings who ruled Yucatan. The Mayas also built great cities, but Toltecs or Mayas, Don Juan, what does it matter? I am a poor Indian crushed under the heel of the white man.”

“You say the Toltecs built this city also?”

“Surely, Don Juan. They came and they went; no one knows whither they went. We are born, Señor, but we know not from whence we come. We die, but we know not whither we go. So with the Toltecs. They came, they went, and we know nothing more. But they left their cities behind them, Señor, to show how great they were. In their wanderings—I speak from the traditions of the priests—in their wanderings, Señor, they came to this place, through yonder cañon—up the gorge, I think, for then there was no river, no road. Here they lost their leader, and built this city to commemorate his greatness. It is so called after him—Totatzine.”

“Oh, that was his name, no doubt.”

“Quien sabe! No; I do not know what his name was. Totatzine is a Nahua word, meaning ‘Our Great Father.’ He was their father and leader, so they called this place Totatzine. It is a monument to his memory.”

“It is a holy city!”

“For ages, Señor, it has been sacred,” replied Cocom, seriously. “Here it was that the god Tezcatlipoca had his shrine, but when the guardians of the opal stone fled hither, the worship of the Chalchuih Tlatonac became the great religion here. Now the soul of the universe is forgotten, and Huitzilopochtli alone is adored with his devil-stone.”

“Who is the soul of the universe?”

“Tezcatlipoca! It is strange, Señor, that the name of this god means ‘the shining mirror,’ while the Chalchuih Tlatonac means ‘the shining precious stone,’ so you see the religion has changed but little.”

“Do you not adore the old gods, Cocom?”

The Indian looked fearfully around, as though he deemed his answer, though delivered in Spanish, would be overheard and understood by some lurking priest.

“No, Señor Juan,” he whispered at length. “I believe the opal can prophesy because it is inhabited by devils, as we are told by the good Padre, but I worship the Holy One and His virgin mother. I am a Catholic, Señor, but once I was an adorer of Huitzilopochtli, and it is hard to break away, Señor, from the habits of youth. I came then—I come now, and though I am looked upon as one devoted to the old gods, yet do I follow the faith of the good Padre!”

“I am glad of that, Cocom. Otherwise you would not help me to escape.”

“True. The Holy Virgin has you in her care, Don Juan. I am, assuredly, the only Catholic here in this city of the devil-stone, and I am your friend. You will I aid to escape.”

“When?”

“Hush! my lord. Behold, Ixtlilxochitli is at hand.”

The suave priest passed them slowly, and bent his head with abject deference as Jack looked at him. He made as though he would have stopped, but Duval waved his hand to intimate that he did not wish to be disturbed. Ixtlilxochitli made a second genuflection, and resumed his way. It was wonderful to see how these bloodthirsty idolators obeyed the slightest wish of their proposed victim.

“He thinks we are plotting,” hinted Jack, looking after the old man with anything but an amiable expression.

“No. He trusts me too much. Besides, he would not care if he did guess we were plotting, Señor, thinking, as he does, that I know not the secret way.”

“And you do know it?”

Cocom looked around and saw nobody. Then he turned towards Jack, and nodded significantly.

“Yes, Señor, I do know it.”

“Bueno! And when—?”

“Another time, Don Juan. We have already spoken too long. Let us resume our examination of the sacred city. It is not wise to be incautious. Folly is loud of speech, but Wisdom is silent.”

Jack acquiesced in this view of the matter, and they walked on. He was greatly interested in all he saw around him, as it is not given to everyone to view a great aboriginal civilisation in its full glory. But for the horrible fear he had of failing to escape, and thus run the risk of being sacrificed to the war-god, he would have been quite fascinated by this extraordinary place. Always a bit of an archaeologist, he viewed with enthusiasm these giant palaces, these massive temples—works of a great race, still as fresh under the blue tropic sky of to-day as when they were first reared in the dim past. When Europe was a land of savages, this city was built; it rose in its splendour while Greece was in her glory and Rome was not. Back, many ages back before Christ; before David, perchance before Abraham, these superb edifices rested majestically in this smiling valley. Still were they inhabited, still were they the home of a race, of a religion—the seat of a barbaric civilisation, the oracle of a faith, as they had been in their pristine glory. The empire of Montezuma had fallen in Mexico, the Incas were now but a name in Peru, gone were the Toltecs, scattered the Mayas, yet the buried city of Totatzine, safe in the midst of primeval forests, endured still, and would endure until that fatal day, which would surely come, when the aboriginal race would silently retreat before the conquering forces of civilisation. Here was the last stronghold of the old gods, driven from the table-lands of Anahuac; here smoked anew those altars overturned by the Conquistadores; here shrieked the victim on the terrible stone of sacrifice; and here was the shrine of the famous Opal, the Chalchuih Tlatonac, the very mention of which thrilled the hearts of all far and wide with superstitious dread.

The sacred city was admirably situated for all purposes. Nothing could be more beautiful than this majestic work of man, set like a jewel within the green circle of the forest-clad mountains. Its health was assured by its being fortunately placed in the genial climate of the Tierra Templada. A vast wall built across the huge rift of the cañon protected it from foes in the west, and the peaks, the impenetrable forests,

formed a barrier against the outside world on all other sides. Its inviolability depended upon its remaining hidden in the shadow of the forests; and in this isolated valley none would guess the secret of its existence. It was veritably a buried city, secluded from the prying gaze of mankind, and was probably the only one of its kind in the world. Beautiful, healthy, well defended, closely hidden, this strange town was the pride of the barbaric tribes of Central America—their Mecca, their Jerusalem; the altar of their ancient faith, the city of the shining precious stone. This was the true city of the opal, and not Tlatonac, for here in the central shrine flashed the great gem on the altar of the war-god. The paths of all savage men converged to this place, and from here welled forth the influence of the old gods which frustrated the efforts of the Padres to Christianise the tribes of Central America.

Down the eastern peaks fell a mighty torrent, which swept irresistibly across the flat plain, and emerged from the valley through the cañon on the west. On either side of this stream was the city built, and three bridges of massive stone connected the one town with the other. That on the right bank of the stream was the city of the priests, while to the left lay the city of commerce, of dwellings, of daily life. In the sacerdotal town a large square surrounded the vast mound whereon was built the teocalli of the Chalchuih Tlatonac, and from this square streets radiated—to the stream, to the mountains, to the wall, like the spokes of a vast wheel. A similar square, with radiating streets, formed the plan of the other town, save that the palace of the Cacique occupied the place of the teocalli. Both towns were crowded with Indians, but the sacerdotal portion was principally filled with pilgrims, come to worship at the shrine of the opal, while the settled population lived on the other side of the stream. There were large caravansaries round the teocalli, for the accommodation of the visitors who came from all parts of Central America; and Totatzine derived its wealth, its splendour, its very existence, from the constant crowds pouring in through the secret way to worship the old gods. The entrance to that way was supposed to be in the shrine itself, but none knew the exact place save the priests of Huitzilopochtli, and these jealously preserved the secret on which depended their power.

Accompanied by the faithful Cocom, who, notwithstanding his advanced age, could bear a great deal of fatigue, Jack explored the two cities, meeting everywhere with the greatest deference from the populace. Unpleasant as was his position, he almost forgot his peril, in contemplating the wonderful buildings around him. The architecture of the houses was similar to that of ancient Egypt. Long ranges of squat pillars, decorated with vivid hues, mural paintings, religious and warlike in character, massive walls of reddish stone, sloping inward as they gained height, colossal flights of steps leading up to cyclopean doorways, and everywhere the grotesque images of the Aztec gods.

From the flat roofs of the houses arose truncated towers, carved rudely with all the hideous forms of an obscure mythology. From these one could see the vast expanse of the city, the interminable lines of the terraces falling one below the other to the narrow streets, the great squares crowded with people, dominated by teocalli, by palace, and far off the sombre length of the wall stretching across the cañon, while beyond this barrier the winding cliffs of the gulch shut out all view of the world beyond. All was vague, awesome, terrible; the city wore a menacing aspect, even in the cheerful sunlight, and the confused murmur rising upward from the streets, seemed like the lamentations of countless victims, the moaning of countless generations, tortured, terrified, blinded by the blood-stained deities of Anahuac.

“If the Señor so pleases, we will go to the teocalli,” said Cocom, after they had quite exhausted the commercial portion of the city, “and there behold the opal.”

“I should like to see it, above all things,” replied Jack, remembering his first glimpse of the gem; “but I thought the priests would not let me enter the temple.”

“You can go anywhere, Don Juan. Remember, in the eyes of the priests, of the people, you are a deity.”

“A poor deity, seeing I am but preserved for that cursed altar. Where will they kill me, Cocom—that is, if they get the chance?”

“On the sacrificial stone in front of the teocalli. Your heart will be taken out, and then, when the sacred fire is kindled, your body will be hurled down the steps of the pyramid.”

“A very pleasant little programme,” said Duval, grimly; “it is a pity it should not be carried out; but as I propose to run away I guess it will be Hamlet with the Dane left out. Bueno, Cocom! let us view the shambles.”

The Indian assented, and, having crossed over the bridge, they walked up the straight, narrow street which led to the central square. Such people as they passed immediately prostrated themselves on the ground, and in some cases suffered Jack to walk over them. The young engineer felt inclined to kick them so enraged did he feel at being thus perpetually reminded of his probable fate; but as such conduct would scarcely be politic, he managed, though with difficulty, to restrain himself.

Soon they emerged from the street between two colossal carved idols of appalling ugliness, and the square lay open before them. Like a vast mountain arose the huge mound with five successive stages, and up to the truncated summit, from the base, stretched a broad flight of sixty steps. Wide and shallow was this staircase, with huge stone masks scowling on each step. These dæmonic countenances were crowned with twisted serpents, and had protruding tongues symbolical of life and light.

“Look like pantomime ogres,” thought the irreverent Jack, contemplating these horrors. “I say, Cocom,” he said in Spanish, “what are these heads meant to represent?”

“They are god stars throwing their light over the earth, Señor. The projecting tongues represent them doing so.”

“Bueno! I never should have thought putting out one’s tongue meant such a lot. Come, Cocom, let us ascend the steps.”

“One moment, Don Juan!” said Cocom, in a low voice, as Jack put his foot on the lower step, “I have a reason for taking you up here.”

“To see the opal?”

“Yes; and to see something else. Connected with your escape, Señor. We can talk freely in the teocalli; for now it is noon, and no priest is in the temple.”

“Good! We will have it all to ourselves. But I wonder at them leaving the opal unguarded.”

“Santissima! It is quite safe, Don Juan! No one would steal the opal. Even if anyone did he could not get out of the town, and if he did get out of the town he would be killed before he reached the coast.”

“I see! Superstition is a greater safeguard than bolts or bars.”

“Promise me, Señor, you will not cry out at that which I am going to show you,” said the Indian, disregarding Jack’s remark.

“I don’t know what you are going to show me, but I promise you I’ll keep silent.”

“Bueno, Señor Juan! Let us go!”

He ascended the steps slowly, followed by Jack, who was much puzzled to know the reason of this warning. Cocom, however, had proved himself to be a true friend, so Duval trusted him implicitly, and was quite satisfied that the Indian did not speak without cause. Up those interminable steps they went, till Jack thought they would never reach the summit, and, being still weak from illness, had to pause three or four times during the ascent. At last they arrived at the top, and Cocom, making Jack sit down to rest himself, went into the temple. During the absence of the old man, his patient amused himself in examining the teocalli, and admiring the splendid view outspread before him.

Far below he could see the dual city like a map, intersected by the stream which cut it clean in two. The streets, running at right angles, made it look like a chess-board, and on both sides of the river were the great gaps of the squares. The surrounding green of the forests, the grey worn peaks sharply defined against the blue sky, the reddish-coloured city in the hollow, all made up an inexpressibly beautiful picture. He could see the figures of men, women, and animals moving like ants through the squares, bright-coloured dots of crawling life. To his ear came the hoarse roar of the river dashing on its rocky bed, the confused hum of voices, the faint cries of merchants, the thin songs of women seated on the distant flat roofs. Hither ascended the mingled murmur, as though the busy city exhaled a huge sigh of sorrow and fear in the ear of their god, whose burdens were so heavy upon them.

Then he turned to view the teocalli, which he found not unworthy of his regard. Indeed, the whole pyramid aroused his admiration. This vast mound of earth, faced with a coating of adobe and covered with silvery cement, was a feat of engineering which at the first sight appeared somewhat startling, seeing it was the work of a barbaric race. Jack was a civil engineer, and learned in mechanics; but it puzzled him to think how this great mass had been built up. What armies of men must have been employed in its construction! What architectural skill was needed! How completely were the four sides covered with the smooth cement! This mound, a mere mole-hill compared with the great artificial hills of Quemada, Cholula, or Palanque, was as marvellous a work of man as the pyramids of Egypt, and as mysterious.

The teocalli itself was a structure of red stone, consisting of two truncated towers, joined together by a flat-roofed building, in the centre of which was a wide low doorway, the sides of which inclined inward till they nearly touched at the lintel. The whole of this façade was elaborately carved with convoluted serpents, mastodon heads, and frequently bizarre emblems intermingled with representations of the moon and stars. Birds, fishes, bows, arrows, and blazing suns were also carved with wonderful skill out of this dull-hued stone, and directly over the door itself flamed a painted opal, darting rays of divers hues. As all these arabesques were gaudily coloured, the effect may be imagined, and Jack's eyes ached as this grotesque confusion of crude tints blazed in the strong sunlight. In front of the teocalli, to the left, was a large serpent-skin drum, used for summoning the devotees of the god; but Jack did not look so much at this as at an object which he viewed with horrified repugnance. This was a huge block of jasper, slanting and polished, on which many unhappy beings had been slain, on which he himself was destined to suffer. Only by a strong effort did he keep his eyes for a moment on this couch of death, and then averted them with a shudder.

Rising from his seat, he walked towards the door of the temple, and was met at the entrance by Cocom. The Indian threw a glance down the staircase, to see that no one was ascending, and then stood on one side to let Jack pass into the shrine.

"You can enter now, Señor, and speak with safety."

It was some time before Jack's eyes became accustomed to the gloom, for the shrine was only lighted from the door. In this vast apartment twilight prevailed, and showed but dimly the flash of jewels, the glitter of gold and silver. The sides were encrusted with stucco, carved with figures of Aztec deities, which formed the court to the terrible war-god. Teoyamiqui, the goddess of death, was there, with her skirt of platted snakes; Teotl, the supreme deity of Anahuac; Tlacatecolotl, his enemy, the spirit of evil;

Quetzalcoatl, Tlaloc, Centeotl, and many other gods of that terrible hierarchy. Masks formed of turquoise stones hung on the walls, here and there were small altars, on which burned scented gums, and, at the end of the hall, under a canopy of richly carved and gilded wood, sat the terrible one, the war-god Huitzilopochtli.

His image was scarcely human, but seemed to be simply a block of wood distorted into hideous shapes. In one hand he grasped a bow, in the other a sheaf of arrows, delicate humming-bird feathers adorned his left foot, and his waist was encircled by a serpent formed of precious stones, emeralds, turquoises, pearls, all glittering dimly in the pale twilight. Behind the god spread a sheet of solid gold, carved with the attributes of his deity, and in front of him appeared a grotesquely carved altar, on which rested a red object. Jack, holding his nose, for the stench of the slaughterhouse was terrible, advanced to see what it was. He started back, with an exclamation of horror. It was a bleeding human heart!

As he started back, a blue flare seemed to strike across his eyes. He looked up, and, lo! The Harlequin Opal. Depending from the roof by a gold thread, the great jewel twisted slowly round in front of the altar, the height of a man from the ground. With every revolution the colours changed, like those of a chameleon. Now would radiate a bright green flame, then a blue ray would flash like a streak of lightning through the gloom; at times the whole stone shone yellow as the sun, and oftentimes a fierce tongue of red would dart from its breast. All these changes were caused by the constant twirling of the cord by which it was suspended, and even in the half light the splendid gem scattered its tints on all sides with the utmost brilliance.

Fascinated by the magnificent jewel, Jack stepped forward to examine it closely; but, just as he laid his finger on it, he heard a voice—

“Beware!”

It was a woman’s voice. He turned in alarm, and saw a woman standing near the doorway. The light fell full on her face, and Jack rushed forward, with a loud cry of joy, to clasp her in his arms.

It was Doña Dolores!

Chapter XIX

An Unexpected Meeting

Time is fond of strange surprises,
Ne’er we know what is before us;
Acting as stern Fate advises,
Time is fond of strange surprises.
Empires fall, a nation rises,
Those who hated, now adore us.
Time is fond of strange surprises,
Ne’er we know what is before us.

It was Dolores! The lost Dolores, for whom he had sought so long, so vainly. She lay on his breast, sobbing as though her heart would break, and Jack was so overcome with emotion that he could not speak. Cocom, with true delicacy, had withdrawn, and they were alone in the temple. For some moments they could neither speak nor move, but remained locked in one another’s arms, silently, passionately, grateful for the meeting. Behind them, the slowly revolving opal flashed out a thin streak of blue. It was an omen of peace, of love.

Jack, as was natural, first recovered himself, and did all in his power to quieten the hysterical emotion of Dolores. The poor girl looked ill and haggard, as well she might, seeing how much she had suffered during the last fortnight. Torn from her home, from her friends, her kindred, her lover, entombed in the sepulchre of a vast forest, with no hope of ever being released, she had abandoned herself to despair. The unexpected appearance of Jack was too much for her overstrained nerves, and she utterly broke down. Duval placed her on a stone near the doorway of the shrine, and, kneeling at her feet, strove to calm her agitation. He was having but ill success, when Cocom appeared in the doorway, and seeing at a glance what was the matter with the girl, at once produced one of those mysterious medicines he constantly carried about with him.

“Let the Señorita drink of this,” he said, thrusting a small bottle into Jack’s hand. “Cocom will watch at the staircase that none ascend. But be speedy, Señor. Ixtlilxochitli remains not long away from the opal.”

When the Indian withdrew, Jack forced Dolores to take some of the drink prescribed. The effect was magical, for in a few minutes her sobs ceased, she became composed, and her eyes brightened with joy as she looked at her lover. Jack was still in his serge shooting-suit, high boots and all; while Dolores, in amber skirt, lace mantilla, and dainty shoes, looked as though she were arrayed for a ball. The Indians had evidently treated her with great tenderness, and save for her haggard looks, she looked little different from what she did at Tlatonac. In their European dresses, they were out of keeping in that savage house of worship. A strange scene, truly. The blood-stained deity, the fantastic figures of the gods, the twirling opal, flashing sparks of light, and at the door these most unhappy lovers, oblivious to all save themselves.

“Querido!” sighed Dolores, looking fondly in Jack’s face; “how like an angel do you appear to me. I thought never to see you again; but now you are here, and I am happy. Tell of the dear ones, Juanito, of Eulalia and Rafael. How does my dear uncle, my aunt?”

“I have not seen them for over a week, cara,” replied Jack, kissing her; “they were much disturbed at your disappearance. We all thought that you had been carried off to Acauhtzin, and with Don Felipe and your brother I went up there to demand you from the base one.”

“I know all of this, mi amigo,” said Dolores, quickly. “Ah! do not look so astonished. Cocom is our friend; Cocom told me all. Of Marina departing with Pepe in *The Pizarro*, of your journey to Acauhtzin, and how you were betrayed to the priests by Don Hypolito.”

“You know my story, Dolores, but I do not know yours. Tell me how it was that you were carried off. I at first suspected the Indians, but afterwards deemed Pepe had taken you to Xuarez. I suspected him wrongly, it seems.”

“No, Juan!” cried the girl, her eyes flashing with anger; “all this misery was contrived by Don Hypolito. He told Ixtlilxochitli that—”

“What!” interrupted Jack, in astonishment; “does Xuarez know the priest? Has he been here? Is he a worshipper of that devil stone?”

“As to that I am not certain, but he has been here frequently, and held long conversations with Ixtlilxochitli. Don Hypolito, you know, says he is a Mestizo. It is false; he is a pure Indian. His parents dwelt here as worshippers of the old gods, and it was in Totatzine that he was born. Afterwards, when he became a man, he grew weary of this buried city, and went forth to seek his fortune. He prospered, as you know, and now says he has Spanish blood in his veins, to gain favour with my own people. But his heart is Indian; he is a friend of Ixtlilxochitli; he comes here frequently. I said, querido, that I was not certain that he worshipped the devil stone. I am wrong; I think he does. Through him does that opal counsel war; and you were delivered to the priests to be the victim of the cycle.”

“And in return for this handsome gift of my life, what does Don Hypolito get?”

“Can you not guess? Ixtlilxochitli, anxious to see the Ruler of Cholacaca one who is a believer in the old gods, has promised to make the Indians fight for him. He can do this by means of the opal’s prophecies. The priest thinks that if Don Hypolito becomes President, he will restore the worship of Huitzilopochtli.”

“Ridiculous!”

“It is not. Yet Ixtlilxochitli, who is a clever man, is completely deceived by Don Hypolito, and believes that this will be so.”

“Now I see how Xuarez came to the sacred city,” said Jack, reflectively; “but you say it was he who carried you off?”

“By means of the Indians, yes. Listen, Juanito. The last time Don Hypolito was here, he told Ixtlilxochitli that he desired to marry me; also, that if I were not carried off from Tlatonac, and placed for safety in the opal shrine, that I would probably marry you. As you can guess, it would never do to let the guardian of the opal marry a white man, so, as desired by Don Hypolito, I was decoyed from Tlatonac, and carried to this frightful place.”

“How were you decoyed?”

“By means of your friend, Don Pedro.”

“By Pedro!” cried Jack, in surprise. “Why, what had he to do with your kidnapping?”

“He had nothing actually to do with it. But his name was used in this way. Listen, mi cara; it is the strangest of tales.”

Jack nodded and settled himself to listen, whereon Doña Dolores began her story at once, as every moment was precious.

“When you left me on that day, Juanito, I went to the cathedral, in order to pray for you, and to obtain from Padre Ignatius the holy relic for your protection. With Marina did I kneel before the shrine of the Virgin, and waited for the Padre, but he did not appear.”

“Nevertheless, he was in the cathedral all the time waiting for you in the sacristy.”

“That is strange,” observed Dolores, in some perplexity, “for I grew weary of waiting, and sent Marina to seek Padre Ignatius in the sacristy. As she did not return, I presumed that she could not find him, and had perhaps gone to look for him in his own church.”

“She went neither to sacristy nor to church,” explained Jack, hastily; “she saw Pepe at the door of the cathedral, as she went to seek the good Father, and departed with the zambo. Then she was afraid of being punished by you, and did not return to the Casa Maraquando until late, when we found you were missing. I expect it was fear that made her run off to Acauhtzin with Pepe.”

“Very probably; yes, Juan, it was as you say. She did not go for the Padre, and he, waiting in the sacristy, expected me to meet him there. I, on my part, thinking Marina would return every moment, remained before the shrine. Then I felt a hand touch my shoulder, and turned round expecting to see Marina. It was a dwarf Indian, called T’ho, who gave me a message from—as I thought—Cocom and Don Pedro.”

“But it was not Cocom who betrayed you, Dolores?”

“No, indeed. But through the craft of Ixtlilxochitli, his name was made use of as a decoy. This Indian, T’ho, did not speak, but gave me an object message.”

“Dios! What is that?”

“Do you not know, Juanito? and yet you have dwelt so long in Cholocaca. An object message is one the meaning of which is read by certain things delivered. For instance, querido, in this case, T’ho gave me a yellow flower and several objects cut in bark, including an arrow, a pair of spectacles, and a round coloured red. Now can you understand?”

“The yellow flower meant Cocom! Is that not so? He told me to-day his name was from such a flower.”

“Yes, that is right—the spectacles?”

“Eh, Dolores! The spectacles! Oh, I know; Peter wears spectacles.”

“You’re right, mi amigo,” replied Dolores, smiling at his discovery, “and the arrow was a hint to be swift—the rough piece of bark, coloured scarlet, showed that some one was wounded.”

“Wait a moment, Dolores,” interposed Duval, hastily; “I can read the message now. It came presumably from Cocom, and read, ‘Come quickly, Don Pedro is wounded.’ ”

Dolores clapped her hands.

“Santissima Madre! You have guessed rightly. That was the message. At once I obeyed it, for I thought poor Don Pedro might be dying.”

“It was kind of you, Dolores, but terribly rash.”

“I did not think it would be far away from the gates, and suspected no evil. Besides, I had been kind to T’ho, and did not dream he would betray me.”

“Which he did?”

“Yes, base criminal, he did. I followed him from the church just as the sun was setting. He led me through the streets out of the town by the Puerta de la Culebra. No one recognised me, as I veiled my face in my mantilla. T’ho guided me past the chapel of Padre Ignatius to the open country—”

“How rash of you!” ejaculated Jack, reproachfully, “how terribly rash!”

“Yes, it was rash, Juanito! But do not be angry, querido. I did it for the sake of Don Pedro, whom I thought was wounded.”

“Well! and what happened after that?” said Duval, kissing her, to show he was not cross.

“Dios!” replied Dolores, tapping her mouth with her closed fan; “I hardly remember! I was asking T’ho where lay the poor Señor Americano, when a cloth was flung over my head, and I was borne swiftly away. With the shock, I suppose I must have fainted, for on recovering my senses I found myself in an open boat going up the coast. I tried to cry out, but was so weak that I could make no sound. Only Indians were in

the boat, and one of them held a cup of wine to my lips. It was, I think, drugged, as I then lost all consciousness, and awoke to find myself in Totatzine!”

“And all this was planned by Don Hypolito?”

“Yes, and executed by Ixtlilxochitli. I have been kindly treated since I have been here, and have a house yonder, across the square, all to myself, with attendants. The high priest told me I had been carried off so that no harm might happen to me, as guardian of the opal, during the war. He also informed me that it was the desire of the god that I should wed with Don Hypolito.”

“Confound his impudence,” muttered Jack, in his native tongue. “And what did you reply, Dolores?”

“I said I would never wed with the traitor Xuarez; that my heart was given to another, to Don Juan, the Americano. Ixtlilxochitli was terribly angry when he heard this, and swore that never would the guardian of the opal be permitted to wed a white man. ‘But I have no fear,’ said this base one, ‘for Don Hypolito, the true worshipper of the sacred opal, will aid us to secure this evil Americano, and sacrifice him to the gods.’ ”

“And Don Hypolito succeeded,” said Jack, with a shudder. “The wretch! he had made up his mind to seize me from the moment I set foot in Acauhtzin. Oh, if I can only escape, how dearly will I make him pay for all this treachery.”

At this moment Cocom darted in at the door.

“Señor, the priest, Ixtlilxochitli, is climbing the steps. Hide yourself, lady. You must not be seen with my lord.”

“Why not?” asked Jack, as they arose to their feet.

“Can you ask, after what I have told you?” whispered Dolores, hurriedly. “The priest knows I love you, and if we were seen together you would be detained in prison until the day of the sacrifice. Not even your character of a god could save you from that. Cocom contrived our meeting here, and the priests suspect nothing. Trust to Cocom! He will tell you our plans of escape. Adios! I must hide!”

“When will I see you again, angelito?” said Jack, kissing her hurriedly.

“To-morrow night, in the secret way. Adios!”

She ran rapidly towards the shrine, and vanished behind the image of the war-god, while Jack followed Cocom out on to the vast platform of the pyramid. Midway on the steps they saw the old high priest, painfully climbing upward.

“Will he not find Doña Dolores in there, Cocom, and thus guess we have met?”

“No, Señor. He but comes to see that the sacred fire burns. That the opal yet spins before the god. If the fire should go out, or the opal stand still, great calamities would befall the city. Only does the opal pause when it prophesies.”

“How is it managed?”

“Santissima! Señor, I know not. But come, let us go down. Ixtlilxochitli will just look at the fire, and then descend, after which the Doña Dolores can come down and regain her palace without being seen.”

“Is the shrine thus frequently left alone?”

“Yes, Señor. Save at festivals, it is deserted. But a priest climbs to the temple every five hours, to see that the sacred fire burns. But see, Ixtlilxochitli is near us. Be cautious, my lord.”

When Jack paused on his downward way, the priest coming up at once knelt on the steps to show his reverence.

“Tell the old fool to get up,” said Jack, angrily, being weary of such mummery.

“My lord bids you rise, Ixtlilxochitli!” translated Cocom, more politely.

The priest arose, with his hands folded across his breast, and, with downcast eyes, addressed Cocom.

“Has my lord seen the holy shrine, and the thrice sacred Chalchuih Tlatonac?”

“Yes; my lord has been graciously pleased to look at these things.”

“It is well! My lord should know well the sacred shrine, so that on the great day he be prepared to act his part, as saviour of the city, with dignity.”

“Deuce take your dignity!” cried Jack, in a rage when this polite speech was translated. “I say Cocom, cannot we knock this old reprobate down the steps; he wouldn’t get up again in a hurry.”

“Nay, nay, Señor! such a course would not be wise,” replied Cocom, hastily thinking that Jack was about to carry his threat into execution.

“What says my lord?” asked Ixtlilxochitli blandly.

“That he will not keep you longer from the sacred offices of the god.”

“It is well! See that my lord has all things, Cocom. The city is his, and we are his, for on his sacrifice to the holy gods does the existence of Totatzine depend.”

Cocom did not deem it politic to translate this speech to Jack, fearing lest the young man should thereupon carry out his threat, and kick the old priest down the steps. Already he was so exasperated at being perpetually reminded of his awful position, that it would take but little more to make him kill this bland, servile priest—to punish at least one of his enemies before he was slain himself. Many men would have been paralysed by the thought of the sacrificial stone, but peril only the more firmly braced Jack’s nerves, and relying, as he did, on Cocom’s help, and his own energy, he was determined to escape from Totatzine in some way or another. The meeting with Dolores had inspired him with fresh energies; and, after leaving Ixtlilxochitli climbing the steps, he hurried Cocom to the palace where he was living, with the idea of hearing what plan of escape the Indian had conceived.

Now that Duval had seen Dolores, the reserve hitherto maintained by Cocom entirely vanished, and he professed himself eager to explain his designs. With instinctive caution, however, he refused to converse in the lower room, where Jack habitually slept fearing lest they should be overheard. It is true they constantly spoke the Spanish tongue, of which the priestly spies were woefully ignorant; but Ixtlilxochitli was quite crafty enough to employ a coast Indian as an eavesdropper; therefore it was wise to put any such possibility of betrayal beyond all doubt. With this intent, they ascended to the flat roof of the palace; but, even here, Cocom felt doubtful of being absolutely safe. In the end, they climbed the mirador, the sole tower of the palace, where it was quite impossible that they could be either seen or heard from below.

Crouching on his hunkers below the low wall of the tower platform, Cocom gravely took out some cigarettes, wrapped in maize-husks, and presented them to Jack, who was lying full-length against the opposite parapet. In a few minutes they were smoking, and talking earnestly.

"The priests, Señor," said Cocom, wrapping his zarape round his thin shoulders, "the priests say that the entrance to the secret way is in the shrine itself on the summit of yonder teocalli. That is a lie!"

"Then where is it, Cocom?"

"Three bridges are there over the stream, Don Juan. The largest and oldest bridge is that central one, which leads straight to the square of the sacrifice. Señor, below that bridge is the secret way!"

"How do you know, Cocom? Were you not blindfolded when you were brought here?"

"Yes, Señor; but I smelt water. The priests blind the eyes, and close the ears, so that the way be not seen, nor the voice of the torrent heard; but I, Señor, have come by the hidden way many times. It is there. I examined it secretly one night at the peril of my life."

"And you found out you were correct?" said Jack, anxiously.

"Absolutely, Señor. Under the bridge the torrent has worn a deep channel; at the very bottom the path runs eastward, and is concealed by a stone wall made to look like the natural cliff of the stream. You go up that path which leads to the foot of the waterfall, then along a passage which leads upward to the thickest part of the forest. Leaving this passage, you ascend steps, which lead to a narrow gorge, cut in the top of the mountain—deep, very deep, Señor, is the pass; no one can see the city therefrom. In the centre of the pass is a circular space, whence ten passages, cut from the solid rock, lead everywhere. Go by eight of these passages, and you fall over cliffs, for the path ends abruptly. They are death-traps. Of the other two passages, one leads to the sacred city, the other to the forests beyond the mountains. In this circular place do the priests blindfold the worshippers. Those who go out can reach that place, those who come in the same; but, unless guided, they would go astray into the death-traps. Therefore are they blindfolded by the priests, and led forward in safety."

"What a horrible idea," said Duval, shuddering; "but how am I to know the right passage?"

"There is a carving of the opal, throwing rays, cut at the entrance of the passage. That is the right one. Go through that, and you come on to a broad platform on the other side of the mountain. Steps lead down from thence to the valley into a broad way built of old by the Toltecs. This road ends suddenly in a wilderness of trees. Then you guide yourself to the coast by red marks on the trunks of trees—the opal, painted crimson, is the sign. Follow those, and you come to the sea-shore."

"How far is it from here to the sea-shore?"

"Fifty miles, Señor."

"Fifty miles!" groaned Jack, in dismay. "However can Dolores manage to do that? and then the perils from incoming Indians!"

"Listen, Señor. Oftentimes the priests send forth penitents who have on them a vow of silence. I will procure dresses for my lord and Doña Dolores. You shall be disguised as Indians under the vow of silence. Should you meet anyone, make a sign thus, and they will permit you to pass without question. As to the length of the way, I will give you provisions, and you must travel to the coast as best you can. It will take many days, but what of that? You will be free."

“Suppose we are pursued?”

“No, Señor; I have a plan. Beyond the great wall of the west is the narrow path of the cañon. When you and Doña Dolores depart, I will take your clothes through the gate, which is always open, and strew some of them on the narrow path. I will let fall some blood of an animal down the side of the cliff. Below rushes the torrent, white and fearful. When the priests find out you are gone they will not search the secret way, not thinking that it is known to anyone but themselves. No, Don Juan, they will go beyond the wall, to the narrow path, and there they will find your clothes, and those of Doña Dolores. They will then think that you have fallen into the torrent, and so all search will cease.”

“That’s a capital idea, Cocom! Your ingenuity is wonderful. But when myself and Doña Dolores come to the coast, what shall we do?”

“Wait there, Señor, in a cave I will describe to you, until I come. I will have to remain behind so as to avert suspicion. Yes; I will tear my hair when you have gone, and say that you have fled by the way of the cañon; the priests will search, and think you have fallen into the torrent. The next day, they will thrust me from the sacred city for having not guarded you well. I will then come down to the coast, to the cave. Once there, Señor, and we shall soon contrive some plan to get back to Tlatonac.”

“But the priests might kill you, Cocom!”

“Have no fear of that, Señor; I am old, my sacrifice would not be acceptable to the gods. And again, Señor, I have secrets of herbs known only to myself, which the priests fain would learn. Should they threaten my life, I will tell them my secrets and go free.”

“You can never return to Totatzine?”

“What matter,” replied Cocom, indifferently. “I am very old. Soon I will die. When I get again to Tlatonac I will worship the Virgin, and die in my corner. Who will care? The old have no friends!”

“You will have a friend in me, Cocom,” said Jack, shaking the hand of the old Indian. “I promise you that neither myself nor Doña Dolores will forget this service. By the way, when do we make this attempt?”

“To-morrow night, Señor.”

“Bueno! But why to-morrow night?”

“At dawn, Señor, to-morrow, there will be a sacrifice to the god, and a man will die. The priests will ask you be present so as to sanctify the ceremony.”

“A kind of rehearsal, I suppose,” said Jack, grimly. “Go on, Cocom.”

“Afterwards there will be a great festival. All day it will continue, till sunset. It may be,” continued Cocom, artfully, “that the priests and the people will drink much; if so, it will be the better for us. In any case, Don Juan, all will be weary, and sleep well at sunset. Then I will disguise you and Doña Dolores as Indians, and lead you to the secret way. By dawn you will be far down beyond the mountains. Travel all night, Señor, so as to reach the central forests before dawn. For it may be that the priests will look from the platform down the road of the Toltecs, and there see you far off. But this, I think, will not be. The whole city will sleep heavily, exhausted by the festival, and when they waken, you, Señor, will have escaped.”

“God grant this scheme may succeed!” said Duval, rising to his feet. “I can never thank you sufficiently for this, Cocom.”

“Bueno! You are the friend of Don Miguel, who saved my life. Be happy, Señor; I will not fail to rescue you from the stone of Huitzilopochtli. And now, Señor Juan, we must go down, else will the priests be suspicious of these long talks between us.”

“There is only one thing I would like to do before I leave Totatzine,” remarked Duval, as they went down to his room.

“And that, Señor?”

“Is to break the neck of Ixtlilxochitli by throwing him down those steps.”

Cocom laughed softly. It was a rare thing for this melancholy Indian to do, but he did not love Ixtlilxochitli, and the idea amused him greatly.

“Come,” said Duval, tapping his friend on the back, “let us go and take the eleven. We must drink success to our scheme in a flask of aguardiente.”

Chapter XX

An Indian Festival

The sacred drums of serpents' skins
Send forth their muffled roar afar;
Before the shrine the opal spins,
A changing star!
That flashes rays of rainbow light
From out its breast of cloudy white,
Rebuking sins
Which mar!

Oh, see the maidens forward bound,
To swing and sway in dances wild,
Loose locks with fragrant chaplets crowned,
Their glances mild!
Exchanged for looks, whose frantic fires
The sacred god himself inspires,
Who thrice hath frowned,
And smiled.

The victim! see the victim pure!
Approaches to the stone to die;
But for a space his pangs endure,
And then on high
His soul mounts upward to the sun,
For ever with that orb to run,
Of pleasure sure
For aye.

That evening, Jack received an invitation from Ixtlilxochitli to be present at dawn next morning on the summit of the teocalli, to take part in a religious ceremony of peculiar solemnity. The god Huitzilopochtli was to be asked if it was his will that the Indian tribes should array their ranks in battle on the side of Don Hypolito Xuarez? Through the opal was the answer to be given. If it gleamed red the god desired war, if blue there was to be peace in the land. Seeing the bloodthirsty character of the deity, and the secret understanding between his high priest and Xuarez, there was but little doubt in the mind of Jack as to what the answer would be. Still, as he was anxious to know how the prophecies were given, and not averse to seeing a unique religious ceremony, he accepted the invitation of Ixtlilxochitli with avidity.

For many days, messages had been sent far and wide, calling on the Indians to repair to the sacred city, and assist at the festival. The town was filled to overflowing, and all the caravansaries in the square of the sacrifice were crowded. Owing to the depth of the valley, the ceremony could not take place precisely at dawn, as it was some time before the sun rose above the peaks of the surrounding mountains. His presence was indispensable to the ceremony, as the heart of the victim had to be held up by the officiating priest for the benediction of his rays. Jack rather shrank from witnessing this horrible rite, particularly as, unless he succeeded in effecting his escape, he would probably be forced to take part in the same function; but curiosity triumphed over repugnance, and he looked forward eagerly to beholding this extraordinary spectacle.

In the grey light of dawn he was awakened by the thunder of the serpent-skin drums, which for some hours roared continuously. Springing out of bed, he hastily put on his clothes, and had just finished dressing when Cocom entered the room. The old Indian was arrayed in white cotton garments, with a chaplet of flowers on his grey locks. He had another wreath, of red blossoms, which he held out for Jack's acceptance—an offer which that young man promptly refused. Red was the emblem of a dedicated victim, and Jack, knowing this, objected to being thus distinguished.

“Carrajo! No, mi amigo,” he said, vigorously, “I am not going to be decked out as a victim yet.”

“Ixtlilxochitli will be angry, Señor.”

“He can be as angry as the devil, for all I care. I don't intend taking any part in this infernal idol worship. Don't they look on me as a god, Cocom?”

“Yes, my lord; you are supposed to be the visible representative of Tezcatlipoca, the soul of the universe.”

“Bueno! Well, the soul of the universe is going to have his own way. What is the use of being Tez—what's-his-name, if you can't do as you please? Besides, I wear European clothes, and wreaths don't go with this rig-out.”

“As you please, Don Juan. Still, it is not wise to anger the priests.”

“I'll take the risk, Cocom. By the way, I trust Doña Dolores will not be present at this butchery to-day.”

“No, Señor! She intends to sleep many hours.”

“Poor girl, she needs rest, seeing we shall be walking all night. I will rest this afternoon myself, Cocom.”

“It would be wise, Señor.”

“You have everything prepared?”

“Assuredly, Señor. You will find nothing wanting.”

“Bueno! Now let us go to the teocalli.”

The immense area of the square of sacrifice was densely packed with Indians, mostly men, as the ceremonies of the war-god were pre-eminently of a masculine character. A few women were to be seen; but, as a rule, they preferred the gentler worship of Tezcatlipoca, and left the fierce adoration of Huitzilopochtli to the rulers and warriors. These pilgrims were one and all arrayed in white-cotton robes similar to that of Cocom, and, like him, bore wreaths of flowers on their locks. Many of the most opulent were draped in mantles of gorgeous feather work, and adorned their persons with collars, earrings, girdles, and bracelets of gold set with rough gems. The summit of the teocalli was unoccupied, as the priests in their sable vestments were waiting for the victim at the foot of the great staircase. A constant thunder of drums, and shrilling of discordant trumpets, added to the wild character of the scene.

Jack had no sooner made his appearance than the multitude, recognising the sacred victim of the cycle, parted to let him pass through. An immense wave of movement swept across this sea of white garments, and all flung themselves on their faces, not even daring to look at the august presence of the incarnate deity. Attended by Cocom, Jack passed up the avenue, opened by religious awe in this living mass, and ultimately gained the steps of the teocalli. Here they saw Ixtlilxochitli, who waved his hand to intimate that they had better ascend the staircase, which they did, without further remark.

Seated on the parapet surrounding the platform of the pyramid, Jack looked down on the throng of people whose dark faces were turned upwards to the shrine of the opal, and shuddered involuntarily, as he thought of the fanaticism which had drawn this concourse together. Devoutly did he pray that Cocom's scheme might be successful, as it was terrible to think that in the presence of such savages he should be slaughtered by those wild-looking priests.

The morning was slightly chilly, as the valley was yet in the shadow; but, beyond the rim of the mountains, Jack could see the rays of the rising sun shooting up in the roseate sky. He trembled and held his breath as a single trumpet bellowed below, and leaning over the parapet, saw that the procession of priests were now escorting the victim up the stair-case. Cocom manifested no emotion, he was but half civilised, after all, and the horror of the coming deed did not strike him as particularly awful. Men must die sometime, was Cocom's philosophic view of the matter, and as well might death take place on the sacrificial stone as in any other way. Jack felt his flesh creep at the idea of what he would soon behold; but Cocom, with folded arms, stood like a statue of bronze, silent, indifferent, unmoved.

Up the staircase climbed that ghastly procession. The victim, a handsome young Indian, tall and slender, seemed indifferent to his fate, and bore his part in the ceremony with becoming dignity. As he ascended the height, one by one he threw away his ornaments and rich robes. His chaplet of flowers, his bracelets, earrings, girdles, his mantle of feather work, his cotton robe of white, they were all strewn on the steps like wreckage, and when he arrived at the summit of the teocalli, he was completely naked. With his splendid muscular development, his immobile face, his absolute repose, standing nude by the jasper stone of sacrifice, he looked like a magnificent bronze statue, and Jack could not but admire the stoical resignation with which he met his death. Ixtlilxochitli vanished through the open door of the shrine, and the sable-clad priests, looking like demons in their religious frenzy, held up their arms to the east. A wild, barbaric chant flowed from their mouths, weird and ear-piercing, rising and falling like the waves of the sea. They chanted long lines of invocation to the sun, and were answered by a confused roar from the multitude below. So fierce, so savage was the music, that Jack shuddered and closed his eyes with horror. The victim made no sign.

Then the high priest, clad in scarlet robes, and holding a knife of itzli in his hand, came forth from the presence of the god, and made a sign to the officiating priests. The rim of the sun was just seen above the heights when five priests darted forward, and, seizing the impassive victim, flung him on the altar stone. An appealing cry to Huitzilopochtli arose from the worshippers, the drums rolled, the trumpets bellowed,

and Ixtlilxochitli rapidly opening the breast of the young man, tore out his heart. The multitude prostrated themselves humbly, an immense sigh exhaled upward from a thousand breasts, and after holding the bleeding heart to the sun, now full in sight, the high-priest flung it at the feet of the idol. Jack felt sick with horror at the consummation of this tragedy, and closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again, the dead body of the victim was rolling down the steps of the teocalli, to plunge into the sea of white boiling in the square.

“Horrible!” he muttered to Cocom; “these priests are devils.”

“Hush, Señor!” replied the Indian in a low voice; “be cautious. Now they consult the opal.”

Wiping the perspiration from his forehead, Duval, leaning on the arm of Cocom, entered the shrine which was crowded with priests. They all made way for him respectfully, and, as the great drum outside commenced to roll out its thunder, knelt in the presence of the deity. Even Cocom bowed before the god, and Jack was the only one standing. A small fire of coals burned on the altar, and thereon Ixtlilxochitli flung priceless gums, storax, copal, and odorous resins. A rich perfume spread through the temple, and a thick cloud of white smoke rolled upward, veiling the hideous face of the war-god, hiding the now rapidly revolving opal. A chant arose, sad and melancholy as the sweeping of the wind through trees, supplicating and sorrowful—an appeal to the terrible deity who had been thus propitiated with blood, with the heart of a man.

A thin shaft of sunlight entering the temple through some unseen opening, smote the great gem with fierce fire, causing it to glitter with blinding splendour. Every eye was fixed on the opal, which continued spinning incessantly, darting its rays of red and blue, and yellow, and green. Jack, at a glance, saw how the miracle was done. The priests cunningly twisted the gold string attached to the roof, and as it slowly unwound itself the great gem revolved. Whether they left the colour it was to show when still, to chance, Jack did not know, but they must have had some trick to make it pause when they chose, for he felt certain the red side of the stone would ultimately reveal itself. In the semi-darkness he kept his gaze on the jewel, twirling in the yellow glare, and heard, as in a dream, the roar of the throng far below waiting the announcement of the god’s will. The teocalli was as an island in the midst of a sea, and against its huge base these living waves beat without intermission.

At first the opal spun rapidly, throwing out sparks of coloured fire, then it gradually slowed down as the string unwound itself. Slower and slower it twisted, sparkling a ray of emerald green, a dazzling shaft of blue, or a glory of golden haze. At last the motion was hardly perceptible, and the worshippers held their breaths in reverential awe. It moved slightly, it paused, it began to revolve slowly backward, and then, with a slow oscillation, hung motionless from the roof. From out its white breast shot a fierce glare of violent crimson. The will of the god was war!

Amid a dead silence Ixtlilxochitli stalked forth to the verge of the staircase, now wearing only his black garments, and held up his scarlet mantle as a sign that the opal was red. A frantic shout of delight roared upward to the sky, and the multitude below broke into a frenzy of joy. The religious ceremonies were at an end, the festival had commenced.

“Por el amor de Dios, let me go back to my room,” whispered Jack, in the ear of Cocom. “If I stay here, I will assuredly smash that idol and kick old Ixtlilxochitli down the steps.”

Unwilling to risk such a scandal, Cocom hurried his charge out of the temple at once. Ixtlilxochitli came forward as Jack departed, evidently expecting to be congratulated on a successful performance, but the young engineer, with a gesture of repugnance, turned his back on the old villain, and sprang down the steps of the teocalli. The high-priest looked grave. This dissatisfaction of the visible deity was a bad omen.

"This place is a hell upon earth," cried Jack, throwing himself down on his couch. "How many victims do they sacrifice to that infernal deity, Cocom?"

The old man counted on his fingers.

"Señor, about one hundred in the year, more or less."

"How terrible!"

"Yes, Don Juan, more were offered up in the old days. It is said by the priests that at the dedication of the great Teocalli in Mexico seventy thousand victims were offered to Huitzilopochtli."

"Butchery! I tell you what, Cocom, if I get safely back, and this war is concluded in favour of the Junta, I will get Don Francisco Gomez to send an army to stop this sort of thing."

Cocom smiled scornfully.

"Nay, Señor; no army could reach the city of Totatzine. It is hidden, and the secret way is but narrow, as you shall see. Besides, Don Juan, I would not aid an army to come hither. The city is sacred."

"But you do not believe in this devil-worship?"

"No, Señor. Still, it was the religion of my fathers. I do not wish it destroyed."

Jack saw that his proposition was distasteful to the old Indian, so did not make further remark, fearful of raising anger in Cocom's breast. If this one friend refused to assist them, neither himself nor Dolores could hope to escape. Therefore Jack was wise and held his peace. Shortly afterwards he intimated his desire to sleep in order to prepare for the fatigue of the midnight journey, so Cocom left him, and departed to make all arrangements for the escape.

All day long the festival continued. Even through the massive walls of his room Jack could hear the shrieks and yells of the worshippers as they maddened themselves with pulque and aguardiente. Once he had the curiosity to ascend to the flat roof and look down on the square. It was filled with a mass of frenzied human beings, who danced and sang, and bellowed wildly. Some cut themselves with knives, others climbing up to the summit of the teocalli flung themselves headlong down the staircase. Great fires were lighted in the square, and rings of Indians, men and women, danced round them, singing frantically. Everywhere the priests, long-haired, sable-robed, inciting worshippers to fresh frenzies, constantly the wild piping of barbaric music, the rumbling of drums. It was a horrible sight, this madness of the multitude, and after a glance or so Jack descended to his bedroom to think over the future.

He was anxious to regain Tlatonac and see his friends once more. Philip and Peter, and Tim, would be grieving for his loss; but they, no doubt, thought that he was at Acauhtzin and not pent up in this city of devildom. Jack knew well that Philip would never have turned *The Bohemian's* nose south unless he had been compelled to do so. Against the heavy guns of ships and forts the bravest man could do nothing, and the yacht had been forced to retreat. Doubtless Philip had steamed direct to Tlatonac, and insisted on an army being sent to Acauhtzin to release his friend and Dolores. But this could not be; as Jack felt sure there were no transports to take the soldiers northward by sea, and the inland route was impossible.

How had the war gone? Had the torpederas arrived? or had Don Hypolito sent the war-ships filled with soldiers southward to attack Janjalla, and from thence forced his way overland to the capital? The campaign would probably be conducted as theorised by Don Rafael. Xuarez would first capture Janjalla, march his troops northward across the plains to effect a conjunction with the Indians before the walls of

Tlatonac, and then bring his war-ships up to the capital. In this way the city would be assaulted on both sides: bombarded by the war-ships, and stormed by the regular troops of the Opposidores and the Indian tribes.

"I must escape," thought Duval, as he restlessly tossed and turned on his couch. "This last order of the Opal will send an Indian army to the walls of Tlatonac. I know all or most of the plans of Xuarez and when I tell them to Don Francisco he may be able to thwart them. It is now two weeks since I was taken by that infernal Don Hypolito, and we cannot regain Tlatonac for at least another five or six days, if, indeed then. Three weeks is a long time, and many events may have happened. I hope those fellows are all right. Once I get back, we shall manage to baffle Xuarez in some way."

These thoughts were not conducive to slumber, but during the afternoon he managed to obtain a few hours of sleep. The herbal medicines of Cocom had completely restored him to health, and he now felt strong enough to undergo the hardships of the journey to the coast. Dolores, however, was delicate, and Jack dreaded to think how she would suffer. Still, it was a case of life or death, so it was best to make the attempt. Anything was better than the certainty of a horrible death for one, constant imprisonment for the other. At whatever cost, they must escape.

"It's a case of Pike's Peak, or bust," said Jack recalling the favourite expression of an American comrade. "I hope to the Lord we won't bust, this trip."

Towards sunset Cocom came to wake him for the great attempt. He brought a very gratifying report as to the state of the population, who were all either drunk or worn out with religious frenzy. The priests were scarcely better, and in three hours not a soul in the sacred city would be capable of observation or movement. It is true that in the commercial half of the town across the torrent, many people might be on the alert; but fortunately the entrance to the secret way was on the sacerdotal side of the bridge, so that the two lovers could escape unseen. Jack was delighted to hear that things promised so well, and proceeded under the supervision of Cocom to disguise himself as an Indian.

It was not a particularly agreeable task, for he had to strip to the buff, and sponge himself from head to foot with a liquid so as to darken his skin. He was also forced to sacrifice his moustache, as the Central American Indians have no hair on their faces. Jack sorely rebelled against this demand, but recognising that there was no help for it, he shaved himself clean as directed, stained his face, dyed his hair, and at length stood out a very athletic young Indian. Being thus physically perfect, he assumed sandals of hide, short white cotton drawers, a loose cotton shirt, an ample scarlet woollen mantle, and a crown of peacock's feathers. Cocom also adorned him with a plentitude of bracelets and jingling ornaments. Thus arrayed, Jack was supposed to be a penitent under a vow of silence, travelling to the coast with his sister.

"I hope, Cocom, there won't be any rain," he said, as he followed the Indian out of the room; "it might wash the dye off."

"No fear! no rain," replied the Indian, confidently; "the staining will hold, Señor. Now, not a word! It is dangerous."

So long had the perfecting of the disguise taken that it was now considerably after eight o'clock, and the moon was shining brilliantly in the sky. Guided by the old man, Jack stepped lightly across the square, which was cumbered with human bodies in all kinds of positions. Some sleeping heavily from exhaustion, others from intoxication, the whole of the immense area looked like a battle-field strewn with dead men. In the midst arose the huge mound of the teocalli, menacing, formidable. Not a sound broke the stillness, save the sigh of some sleeper, or the restless turning of another. Under the clear sky lay the field of the dead, and as Jack stepped gently across the prostrate bodies he could not help shuddering.

Remembering Cocom's caution, however, he uttered no sound, but followed the Indian towards the bridge. Here, in the shadow of the wall, they found Dolores stained as was her lover, and fantastically tricked out in savage finery. When she saw Jack's tall form with the nodding plumes on his head, she could not restrain an exclamation of surprise, but in another moment was clasped in his arms.

"Peace, dear one," whispered Jack, fondly kissing her; "keep your heart brave. We must not wait a moment. Alas! querida, I feel doubtful that you will bear the fatigues of the mountains."

"Fear not, Juanito!" she answered, hastily drying her tears; "the Virgin will sustain and protect us in the wilderness. With thee by my side, I have no fear."

Cocom, impatient of this delay, made a clucking noise with his tongue, so they at once sprang towards him. He guided them a little distance past the bridge towards the left, and paused before a high wall, pierced by a dozen or more gateways, with massive doors, grotesquely carved. By some trick, known only to himself, the old man opened the valves of one door, and motioned them to enter. On doing so, they found themselves in an immense oblong court-yard, decorated round the walls with nothing but huge statues of the god Huitzilopochtli. Cocom had closed the outside door, and standing in the open court, the fugitives could see no mode of ingress or egress. The moon shining brightly made all things as clear as day, and all around, at intervals of a yard, arose the mighty images, between which was but smooth wall. It was a trap out of which no one could hope to emerge.

"The worshippers, Señor," explained Cocom, in a low voice, "are admitted into this court from the secret way on the right. When the court is full, their bandages are removed, and no one can tell how he entered, or how he can go out. This confuses all, and then the bandages are replaced, and they are thrust out of those many doors on to the street, and guided to the great square. When they see, they behold but the great teocalli, and cannot tell the way by which they came. Neither can the dwellers in Totatzine, for none are admitted to this court."

"And the secret way?" asked Jack, anxiously.

"Is behind one of those statues, Señor."

Both Jack and Dolores looked blankly at the long line of hideous images against the opposite wall. One statue was as like the other as two peas, and it was absolutely impossible to tell which one concealed the entrance. Jack turned to Cocom, and shook his head.

"If my life depended on it, I could not tell."

"Eh, Señor, your life does depend on it," said Cocom, grimly, enjoying his little joke. "Behold!"

He walked slowly forward, and to all appearance chose a statue at random. Touching a spring in the protuberant stomach of the idol, the massive image swung outward, revealing a dark passage. The two lovers ran forward, but were stopped by Cocom.

"That passage, Señor, ends with a precipice," he said, with emphasis; "if you went down there, you would fall into the torrent."

"A misleading way," said Duval, shrinking back with a shudder at the horrible imagination of the idea. "Are there others?"

"This, and this, and this," replied Cocom, causing several statues to swing out of their places. "All passages you see, Don Juan; all snares for the unwary. Let me put the images back again. So! Now, Señor,

observe. This image of Huitzilopochtli has a representation of the opal in its forehead. That is the mark of the way throughout. See!”

The statue swung round, and Cocom, stepping boldly into the yawning cavity disclosed, beckoned to them to follow. With the terrified Dolores on his arm, Jack did so, and they found themselves at the top of a flight of damp-looking steps. Once inside, and Cocom, pressing the spring, restored the image to its proper position; then, taking Jack’s hand, led him down the staircase. Claspings Dolores tightly, he cautiously descended into the pitchy gloom. They seemed to be proceeding into the bowels of the earth. Down, and down, and still down, until the hoarse roar of the torrent struck their ears, and emerging into a darkness little less dense than that in the passage, they found themselves on a rocky ledge, below the huge structure of the bridge, almost on a level with the water. At their feet swirled and foamed the flood, raging over sharp-pointed rocks. To the right, a path led upward in a gentle slope; to the left, a similar path descended. Cocom pointed to this latter.

“Another trap, Señor,” he said, grimly, “ending in the cañon. Take that path, and you would die. Follow this one to the right, and it will lead you to the great platform beyond the mountains. From thence you can descend by the great way, and when in the forest, track your path by the scarlet sign of the opal. Always the opal, Señor. Go nowhere but where that sign points.”

“I will remember,” replied Jack, confidently.

“Take this wallet, Señor. It contains food for some days, and cacao leaves, and strong drink. It will last until you reach the cave whereof I told you. Wait there for me, and I will come shortly. Remember always the rule of silence—that you are both penitents—the sign thus—lip and forehead. Now go, Señor. I depart to scatter your clothes on the narrow way, and spread a false report of your death in the torrent, while escaping. In four days, Señor, expect me at the cave. Adios, lady of the precious stone, and you, Señor.”

He sprang backward into the darkness up the stair, and left the lovers standing in that gloomy inferno, with the torrent roaring below, the huge masonry of the bridge high above, and, to the right, that perilous way which they must tread to reach safety. Duval expected Dolores to give way at thus finding herself in such danger, but, to his surprise, she was brave, and gay, and strong.

“Come, querido,” she said, cheerfully, “let us go at once. We must reach the forests before dawn, if possible.”

“It will exhaust you terribly, angelito!”

“Probably. Still, I must keep up, if only for your sake! Come, querido! let us depart.”

They moved simultaneously towards the right.

Oh, that interminable passage, long and narrow and always ascending. They thought it would never end; but at length it terminated at the foot of the waterfall. Down from a great height thundered great masses of water, smashing to foam in the basin below. The spray, rising fine and mist-like, was damp on their faces. They could not hear themselves speak, owing to the roar. Jack grasped the hand of Dolores to give her courage, and turned off abruptly to the right where they entered a passage cut out of the solid rock. Still gently sloping upward, the path led them out into a vast clearing, girdled on all sides by great trees. The moon shone bright as day; and across the grass ran an indistinct track. Following this, they found a great flight of steps leading upward under the boughs of mighty trees—pine, and oak, and hemlock, throwing their giant branches across, and almost shutting out the moonlight sky. The staircase was crumbled and old, but wonderfully built of great blocks of stone. Jack could not restrain his admiration at this Titanic work.

“How did they do it?” he said to Dolores, as they painfully climbed up the superb stair; “they must have known a lot about engineering, those Toltecs. To swing these blocks into their places must have taken derricks and complicated machinery. A wonderful work; a wonderful race. How Philip would enjoy this!”

“I think Señor Felipe would rather be where he is—in Tlatonac,” replied Dolores, wearily. “I would I were in the Casa Maraquando.”

“Cheer up, my heart! We will be there in a few days. Will I carry you, cara?”

“Dios, no! You are already laden!”

“But you are as light as a feather.”

“Eh, Juanito. You would not find that after carrying me for an hour or so. No; I am still able to walk. I am stronger than you think.”

They steadily climbed up the staircase, and at length entered the narrow gorge described by Cocom. Here Jack made the girl sit down and drink some wine, which did her so much good that in a few minutes she declared herself ready to resume the journey. Thus fortified, they entered the gorge, and, cautiously following its windings, at length emerged suddenly into a circular space. So unexpectedly did they enter that, as passages opened out in all directions, they could not tell by which way they had come. This pit—for it was little else, hewn out of the rock—was fifty or sixty feet in depth, and must have represented years of toil. On all sides, innumerable passages darted out like rays, and it was this thought that caused Jack to exclaim—

“It is like the opal, Dolores. This space is the stone, those passages the rays; so it serves a double purpose—to mislead the runaway, and yet be a symbol of the Chalchuih Tlatonac.”

Fortune favoured the fugitives, for the moon, directly overhead, sent down her full glory into the pit. Had they arrived later, they would probably have had to wait till dawn, as the blackness would have been too intense to permit them to find the true outlet. But the moonlight, by happy chance, was so strong that, after carefully examining the sides of several entrances, Jack at length hit on the sign. A huge crimson blot, with scarlet rays, blazed on a passage to the right.

“Here we are, Dolores,” cried Duval, joyfully, “this is the right way; but we must be careful, and not risk a snare; one can never tell what these infernal Indians are up to.”

With great caution they entered the tunnel indicated by the sign, and feeling every step before them, for the whole place was intensely dark, moved onward at a snail’s pace. The tunnel wound hither and thither, until they felt quite bewildered. For a time the passage was level, but after a series of turnings it began to slope gently downwards, and so continued to the entrance.

“I hope to Heaven there are no branch tunnels,” said Jack, anxiously, “we could easily go off the main track in this gloom.”

“I am sure there are no side tunnels,” replied Dolores, decisively; “even the priests could not find their way through this place otherwise than with one way. If there were other tunnels, they would lose themselves, and that they would not care to risk.”

“Well, let us move on. At all events, the tunnel is getting straighter,” remarked Jack, hopefully. “I wish Cocom had given us a torch.”

“What is that yonder?” cried Dolores, pressing his arm. “A gleam of light.”

“Bueno! It is the exit. Come, Dolores, and say no word, lest, when we emerge on to the platform, there should be Indians waiting there. Remember our vow of silence.”

Encouraged by this sign of deliverance, they hurried rapidly forward, quite certain that the ground was safe, and in a few minutes stepped out of the tunnel’s mouth on to a mighty platform, half way down the mountain. Jack cast a swift glance to right and left, but the area of masonry was quite bare. They were the only human beings thereon. He turned to speak to Dolores, and found her staring motionless at the magnificent scene before her.

The platform, Jack guessed, was fully a quarter of a mile in length, and enormously wide. It had first been hewn out of the living rock, and then faced with masonry, flagged with stones. Here was adopted the same device for misleading strangers as had been done in the court of the gods, at the entrance from Totatzine. The whole face of the cliff, at the back of the terrace, was perforated with tunnels, and now that they had moved to the verge of the platform neither of them could tell which tunnel they had come out of. Saving one, all those passages led to death and destruction. Only one was safe, and that the tunnel distinguished by the opal sign. No one, ignorant of that sign, could have escaped death.

“I don’t wonder Totatzine remains hidden,” said Jack, thoughtfully. “The whole of that path is a mass of danger and snares. Now, however, we shall have a clearer way.”

Turning towards the east, they beheld a vast stair-case sloping downward to a broad road, at the sides of which were giant images of the gods. In the pale moonlight they looked like demons, so frightful were their aspects. In long lines, like pillars, they stretched away eastward, into the forests, ending in dim obscurity. On either side, dense foliage; away in the distance, a sea of green trees. There was nothing but trackless woods and this great road, piercing into the emerald profundity like a wedge. Behind, arose tall red cliffs, crowned with ancient trees, tunnelled with black cavities. From thence spread out the platform with its huge blocks of stone, its walls covered with hieroglyphics, statues of fierce gods, and vast piles of truncated towers. Below, the forests, the roadway, the staircase.

“What a terrible place, Dolores,” said Jack, drawing a long breath. “It is like the abode of demons. Come! it is now after midnight, and the moon will soon be setting. While we have the light, let us try to reach the end of yonder avenue.”

“One moment, Juan,” replied Dolores, drawing forth something from her bosom. “While Cocom was with you, I went up to the shrine of Huitzilopochtli and took in—this.”

Between her fingers, in the pale moonlight, it flashed faintly with weak sparks of many coloured fire. Jack bounded forward.

“The Harlequin Opal!” he exclaimed, delighted. “You have taken the Harlequin Opal.”

Chapter XXI

The Fugitives

The sun goes down, the twilight wanes,
With reddened spurs and hanging reins,
We urge our steeds across the plains.
For you and I are flying far,
From those who would our loving mar,

And prison you with bolt and bar.
Sigh not, dear one, look not so white,
My castle stands on yonder height,
We'll reach it e'er the morning's light
The future's joy this night is born,
I wed thee in the early morn,
And laugh my rivals twain to scorn.

It was fifty miles from Totatzine to the coast. Dolores being a woman, and weak, Jack, owing to illness, not being quite so strong as usual, they found it difficult to do more on an average than two miles an hour. To make up for slow walking they stretched out their pedestrianism to twelve hours between dawn and eve, thus reaching the sea-shore in two days. They arrived at the cave spoken of by Cocom, which was a harbour of refuge to them in their sore distress, completely worn out, body and soul and garments. Still they felt a certain amount of comfort in three consolations: First, they had escaped from Totatzine with their lives. Secondly, the wallet was not yet exhausted of meat and drink, so that they were in no danger of starvation. Thirdly, Cocom, always supposing he would hoodwink the priests as to his share in their escape, would arrive within twelve hours or thereabouts. Thus fortified with food and hope, they stayed thankfully in the cave and waited the arrival of the old Indian.

As to the journey from platform to cave, that had been a horrible dream, a nightmare of hardship, of weariness, of many pangs. Starting from the terrace shortly after midnight, they had traversed the avenue in three hours. It was five miles in length, and proceeding at the rate of two miles every sixty minutes, it can be easily seen that they could gain the shelter of the forest long before dawn. The great road ended abruptly amid a confused heap of ruins, forest trees, tangled undergrowth. Doubtless, in the old time it had continued even to the coast, but time and the Indians had obliterated all traces of its magnificence five miles down. The former did this because it is his invariable custom to so treat all human works, which set themselves up as enduring for ever; the latter played havoc with the relics of their ancestors' magnificence, so as to hide the city of Totatzine from the eyes of the white destroyers, who had trodden out of existence those same ancestors. Nature had also done her share in the work of destruction, and sent a wave of green trees across the straight line of cause-way. Therefore, the road which began so proudly at the foot of the great staircase ended suddenly, after five miles, in the tangled wilderness.

The journey from Totatzine to this point had been long and arduous. The moon had set behind the hills so that it was now dark, and to explore an unknown forest in such gloom would have been foolish, therefore Jack insisted that they should take some rest. In the midst of an old palace he constructed a bed for Dolores with the aid of his and her own cloak, and after seeing her safely bestowed therein, lay down at the entrance so as to act as a sleeping sentinel if such a thing be possible. Nothing particular occurred, however, and when they awoke the sun was already high in the heavens. Then they made a frugal breakfast and resumed their journey.

The way being no longer clearly defined, their progress was necessarily slow from this point. To the right, on the trunk of a tree, appeared the sign of a scarlet opal as before pictured on the rocks, so to the right they went, and at once, even at these few steps from the causeway, found themselves in the heart of a wild, tropical forest. There was something terrible to these two civilised beings about the primeval savagery of this vegetation and exuberant foliage. Dense, tangled, almost impenetrable, it reminded Jack of the wood grown by fairy power round the palace of the sleeping beauty. That forest, however was to keep lovers out; this, alas! served to keep these lovers in. It lay between them and the coast, quite thirty-five miles of wild growth, and at times Dolores almost despaired of breaking through the barrier. Not so Jack, he was hopeful of ultimate success being strengthened in his faith by the constant appearance of the opal sign.

On every side of them rose giant trees of hoary age, their trunks seemingly supporting the verdant roof above-head. At times, so dense were the leaves that sky and sun and kindly light were shut out entirely, and they moved through a translucent twilight of tremulous green. From trunks and boughs depended lianas like ropes binding the forest giants together, or, dropping to the ground, formed a ladder up which climbed the most exquisite flowers. Splendid tree-ferns drooped their gigantic fronds on high, springing thickly from tall pillars, rough, brown, and hairy. Below, the ground was thick with brilliant blossoms, which seized every chance offered by rock, liana, and trunk to climb upward to that light excluded by the sea of foliage overhead.

At every step the forest changed its appearance, as though it were an enchanted wood. Here, all was savagery and gloom; step forward, and lo! a wide and sunny glade. One moment, and they were surrounded by moss-covered rocks; the next, and a noble avenue of palms opened a vista before them. Pools of water sparkled here and there; babbling brooks winding capriciously in and out in wayward circles; at times, the sudden gleam of a waterfall, threading downwards in white streaks from a giant rock; and again, the miasma of a swamp, black and evil-looking, in whose waters rolled the trunks of fallen trees. Everywhere flowers bursting into bloom; everywhere new leaves swelling into being; everywhere the exuberant life of a tropic climate. The atmosphere was warm and damp, a clammy air permeated the woods, and the whole place was one vast hothouse, where fecundation went on unceasingly. Throughout, a rich perfume pervaded the air, heavy, sickly, and languorous.

Fortunately, Jack's sight had been rendered keen by his profession, else it would have been difficult to have discerned the sign, on trunk of tree, or mossy rock. Scarlet is a noticeable colour, and had the opal sign been the only red hue in the forest, there would have been no difficulty in the matter. But everywhere scarlet flowers made fire of the intense emerald of foliage and grass. Dazzling masses of crimson verbena glared fiercely in the dim gloom, vermilion blossoms burned like lamps in the dense brushwood, wreaths of ruddy leaves made streaks like veins overhead, and the ground blazed with the pinks and carmines and purples of an infinite variety of blossoms. It was difficult to pick out the red-opal sign amid this constant repetition of the same tints; but Jack, by careful observation, managed to do so, being guided at times by a well-defined path. Indeed, often he was tempted to ignore the sign, and go only by the path; but, as numerous branches led off from the omphalos of the great road, he was afraid of going astray, so kept his reckoning by the opal alone.

For two days they travelled through this zone of verdure, and at length, by the salt smell in the air, became aware that they were nearing the ocean. At times they met Indians, gaudily dressed, with painted faces, and deadly looking weapons; but these, on observing the scarlet mantles of the pair, and receiving the sign on lips and forehead, stepped aside to let them pass. They recognised that these travellers were proceeding eastward by the will of the god, under the vow of silence. Superstition, stronger than greed or cruelty, protected them from the savages of the wilderness.

The journey was not dull, in spite of their anxiety and dread of being followed. On every side the forest was full of life, and Dolores was delighted to see the constant flashing of humming-birds, green, red and yellow glories, which darted through the still air like flying gems. Once they saw the yellow hide of a jaguar, black spotted, sleek, and terrible. Jack had nothing but a knife, given to him by Cocom, and regretted that he had not his revolver with him. A knife was but a poor weapon to do battle with such a terrible foe. To their relief, however, the animal only eyed them for a few minutes in startled surprise, and then slunk away among the undergrowth. Other perils from wild animals they had none.

Sometimes the whole air would be alive with butterflies. Purple, yellow spotted, azure striped, they fluttered everywhere. One would have thought the flowers were alive, and flew from stem to stem. Peter, as Jack thought, would have been in his element. This forest was the true paradise of butterflies. But they had no time to admire all this skill and fecundity of Nature. Resolutely following the opal sign, they pushed onward through the forest. They saw on all sides the puzzle monkey trees, with their sharp spikes;

ombù trees, whose shade is so dense; aloes, whose branches spread outward like the seven-stemmed candlestick of the Revelation; palms, mangoes, wild fig trees; cactus, burning with fleshy scarlet blossoms, and shallow lagunas, swampy pools of water, filled with sedges and rushes and slimy weeds.

The din was constant. Monkeys swung themselves from bough to bough overhead, chattered without ceasing; parrots, gay plumaged, harsh voiced, shrieked discordantly in their ears; the roaring of jaguars and pumas sounded faint in the distance, like muffled thunder; and ever rasped the stridulation of restless grasshoppers, unseen but noisy.

Such a wealth of invention, such overpowering luxuriance, wore out the senses, wearied the soul. Both Jack and Dolores were glad when the sharp, salt smell of the sea struck knife-like through the enervating atmosphere. They had been travelling since dawn, and now, at noon, on the third day of their departure from Totatzine, they beheld the great waste of waters, flashing like a mirror in the sun. Jack should have greeted it as did the Hellens of Epaminondas, with a joyful cry of "Thalatta! Thalatta!" but he had forgotten his Greek, and was too weary to feel poetic.

At this stage of their journey, they met with many Indians, who here landed in order to proceed to the shrine of the opal. Dolores was much afraid of their secret being discovered, and even Jack was somewhat doubtful of the efficacy of the vow of silence; but, in this case, as in others, fanaticism proved their safeguard, for they passed unharmed, even unspoken to, through the mass of savages. On arriving at the verge of the sea, Jack at once sought out the cave described by Cocom; and, leading Dolores thereto, for a short space of time, they were in safety.

From this point, as Jack had learned in Totatzine, the city of Tlatonac was distant about twenty miles down the coast, and as there were plenty of canoes drawn up on the beach, it would have been easy for them to have proceeded at once on their journey. Gratitude to Cocom, however, prevented this, and they remained that night in the cave in order to await his arrival. The hiding-place was a natural cavern of wide extent, and, after making Dolores as comfortable as he could, Jack retired to the entrance, and kept guard, lest they should be surprised by some wandering savage.

Throughout this perilous journey, nothing could exceed the tenderness and chivalry with which Duval behaved towards Dolores. He was tireless in his efforts to spare her all fatigues, in keeping up her spirits, in guarding her from all the annoyances consequent on travelling ill-provided through a dense forest. Dolores said nothing at the time, but took silent note of all this courtesy, and over and over again breathed a thankful prayer that the man whom she loved had proved himself so noble in the hour of danger. It was a disagreeable position to a girl brought up as she had been in strict observance of etiquette; but Jack came triumphantly through the ordeal, and gained rather than lost in her eyes by the nobility of his character, by the rare delicacy of his behaviour.

The only thing that Duval feared was that the loss of the opal might cause the priests to mistrust Cocom's story, and send out word far and wide that the sacred gem had been torn from the temple. It was true that they had gained a twelve hours' start, but, owing to the delicacy of Dolores' constitution, they had travelled very slowly to the coast, and at any moment messengers with news of the theft might arrive on the scene. In such an event, all the Indians on the coast would be examined as to whether a man and woman had passed seaward in company. Owing to their clothes being scattered in the gorge, the priests (supposing they did not trust these signs of death) would know they were disguised as Indians, therefore the dresses would avail them but little. Neither would the vow of silence be of much use, as in this crisis they would be questioned as to whom they were, to what tribe did they belong, and as neither of them could speak a word of Indian, the situation would become serious. The only hope, therefore, that they had of safety was of the arrival of Cocom without delay. If he arrived next morning, all would be well, if not, Jack discussed the advisability of taking a canoe, and proceeding at once to Tlatonac.

At dawn next morning they were both eating a hurried meal in the cave, and talking over the advisability of making a retreat while it was yet time.

“As soon as they find out the opal is missing, the whole country will rise in arms,” said Jack, emphatically; “and every Indian will be questioned closely, both within and without the town.”

“But the news won’t reach the coast for some time, Juan.”

“I question very much if it has not reached the coast now,” replied Jack, a trifle drily. “From the end of that road are many other paths to the coast, so swift messengers might have passed us in that way. Let us hope, however, that this is not the case, and that Cocom will be the first to bring the news that the opal is lost.”

“Cocom will guess that I have taken the opal!”

“Doubtless; and the question is whether he will permit you to take it to Tlatonac.”

“But why not, Juanito? I am the guardian of the opal. It is mine.”

“Querida, you are wrong. It is the property of Huitzilopochtli. You are only its guardian—a mere honorary position that does not entail possession of the stone. Its proper place, according to the Indian’s superstition, is in the shrine of Totatzine.”

“But Cocom is a Christian. He will not care about my taking it.”

“Dios! I am not so sure of that, Dolores. Cocom, by his own profession, was brought up an idolater, and old habits cling. It is true that he was converted by the good Padre, and I have no doubt his Catholicism is very fair—for an Indian. But if he does not worship the war-god, he at least believes in the prophetic quotations of the Opal; and, thus believing, may resent it being taken from the shrine.”

“Then I will say nothing about it.”

“Useless, angelito! Cocom knows that no other person than ourselves would dare to steal the Chalchuih Tlatonac. I was with him all the time, so he will know it cannot be me. Naturally enough, he will think it is you.”

“And therefore betray us?”

“No, I do not think he will do that. After all his trouble, it would be foolish of him to now play the traitor, for then his concurrence in our escape would become known, and get him into bad odour with the priests. But it is possible that he might insist on your leaving the opal behind, to be sent back to Totatzine.”

“No,” cried Dolores, decisively; “I will rather throw it into the sea. Now that the gem is away from the shrine, those horrid priests may stop sacrificing men to the idol. Besides,” she added, naïvely “it is mine.”

“Ah! that is an all-sufficient reason,” replied Duval, smiling. “Like all women, querida, you are fond of gems, and do not like to part with this one.”

“It is very beautiful,” sighed Dolores, taking the stone from her breast. “See how it glitters, Juanito. Ah! what is that?”

A long, shrill whistle sounded outside the cave.

“Cocom!” cried Jack, starting to his feet. “Hide the opal for the present, Dolores.”

It was indeed Cocom who entered. Cocom looking much older than usual, and quite worn out with his long journey from Totatzine. He saluted them gravely, and wrapping himself in his zarape crouched on the floor of the cave, with his eyes intently fixed on them both. The expression of his face was as usual, and Jack was quite unable to decide whether he approved of or resented the rape of the shining precious stone.

“You look tired, Cocom,” said Jack, passing him a flask of aguardiente. “Take a drink of this. It will do you good.”

The old man greedily seized the flask, and drained it to the bottom. As it was more than half full Jack fully expected to see him fall helplessly intoxicated on the floor. But Cocom’s head was seasoned to strong drink, and it only made him look younger, as though the aguardiente were a draught from the fountain of Youth.

“Have you it, Señorita?” he asked, fixing his beady eyes on Dolores.

“Yes,” replied Dolores, off her guard. “That is, I—”

“Bueno!” said Cocom, nodding his head. “You have the opal. I am content.”

Jack drew a long breath of relief. Cocom’s sympathy with the idolatry of his youth was not evidently strong enough to stir him into protest against the gem being stolen. Or perhaps he deemed that Dolores had more right to it than Huitzilopochtli. At all events, he did not seem ill-pleased that she was now in possession of the celebrated stone.

“What say the priests, Cocom?” he asked anxiously.

“They are in despair, Señor, over the loss of the sacred stone.”

“Do they know who has taken it?”

Cocom pointed one copper-coloured finger at Dolores.

“They knew that the Chalchuih Tlatonac is with the guardian; but they think that the guardian and you, Señor, are at the bottom of the cañon—in the bed of the torrent.”

“Then your ruse was successful?”

“Yes, Señor! I strewed the clothes on the narrow path, and in the dawn awoke the town with my cries. Ixtlilxochitli, with his priests, came to inquire the trouble. I told them that you, Señor, had escaped. They, not guessing you had gone by the secret way, thought you had fled alone by the cañon. The narrow way was examined, your clothes were found, the blood on the cliffs, the clothes of Doña Dolores. Then they knew she had fled with you, and deemed both had fallen in the darkness over the cliff into the torrent.”

“And the Chalchuih Tlatonac?” asked Dolores, breathlessly.

“They discovered that loss on returning to the teocalli for the morning sacrifice. All the priests were in despair, and Ixtlilxochitli, knowing you had taken the sacred gem, Señor, burnt a lock of your hair to—”

“A lock of my hair!” interrupted Jack, in surprise; “how did they get that?”

“Some of your hair was cut off when you were ill, and preserved in the temple.”

“And why did they burn it?”

“Because, by doing so, they devote your soul to Tlacatecolotl, the evil one.”

“Oh, the Aztec devil,” replied Duval, carelessly. “Much good that will do them. I should have thought it wiser for them to look for the stone.”

“They are looking for it, Señor, and for your body—in the bed of the torrent.”

“I’m afraid they will be disappointed with the result of their search. So they think we are dead?”

“Yes, Señor. You are safe from pursuit; but I am not.”

“What do you mean?”

Cocom withdrew his left arm from the fold of his zarape. The hand was cut off, and nothing remained but the stump of the wrist, seared with hot-iron. A hideous object. Dolores cried out, and hid her face in her hands with a shudder. Jack at once understood why Cocom had acquiesced so calmly in the theft of the opal.

“Behold, Señor!” said the old man, shaking the mutilated wrist at Jack, with a look of hatred; “this was my punishment for suffering you to escape. My hand was cut off before Huitzilopochtli, and burned with red-hot iron. Then I was shut up in prison, to wait till the god’s will was known.”

“My poor Cocom!” cried Jack, much distressed, “how you have suffered for aiding us. Thank Heaven you have escaped!”

“Yes, Señor. Ixtlilxochitli did not think I could leave the city; but in the night I got out of the window of my prison, and followed you down the secret way. With all my strength I followed, but I feel sure that the hounds of the priests are on my track.”

“But as Ixtlilxochitli knows you are not aware of the secret way, he—”

“Señor,” interrupted Cocom, vehemently, “he must know it now. After the discovery of the cañon, guards were placed there. I have left the city. One other way only could I have gone—the secret way. Believe me, Señor, the Indians are not far behind.”

“Dios!” cried Dolores, in terror, “we will be discovered!”

“Not so, Señorita! On my way hither, I met a friend coming from Tlatonac to the shrine. He told me that the boat of the Americano had gone some days since to Acauhtzin, to demand the release of Don Juan. She returns to-day, and will pass this point at noon. There is a canoe below, Señor! Let us depart in that canoe, and meet the steamer.”

Jack sprang to his feet, with a shout, at this prospect of deliverance.

“Philip’s yacht,” he cried, joyfully; “good! We will do as you say, at once, Cocom, and cut across the line of her passage. She will be sure to pick us up.”

“Not now, Señor! At noon!”

Jack went to the entrance of the cave, and looked at the altitude of the sun.

“It wants two hours to noon. In one hour we will start.”

“Bueno!” replied Cocom, stolidly, “let us hope the hounds of Ixtlilxochitli will not find us. Once we see the boat of the Señor Americano, and we are safe, if not—”

Cocom shook his head to intimate he had grave doubts of what would be their fate in such an event, and took another drink of aguardiente. Jack knew that in returning Philip would keep the yacht close to the shore, in order to avoid the war-ships of Xuarez, which generally kept a long way to seaward. He, therefore, took up his station at the mouth of the cave, and watched the northern horizon for the first trail of smoke from the yacht’s funnel.

As in most tropical countries, towards the middle of the day all sounds of life ceased, and Nature took her siesta. In the hush, the three people in the cave heard far away a wild cry. Cocom sprang to his feet, and hurried to the entrance to lay his hand on Jack’s arm.

“Ixtlilxochitli’s hounds! Let us get away at once. Quick, Señor! We will start now.”

“And be safe,” cried Jack, excitedly, pointing towards the horizon; “yonder is the yacht!”

There was a speck on the horizon, but they had no time to look at it. The cries of the Indians sounded nearer and nearer. Guided by Cocom, they left the cave and rushed down a steep road to the beach. Hastily selecting a large canoe, Cocom sprang in. Jack lifted Dolores over the gunwale, and stepping in himself, pushed quickly off. Just as they got her afloat, a crowd of Indians burst out of the woods, and made for the beach. With keen eyes they had distinguished Cocom as the fugitive whom they were after, and fearful of losing their prey, poured down in a tumultuous mass. A shower of arrows fell around them, but luckily did no damage, save one which grazed Jack’s cheek. In another moment, they were in deep water, paddling quickly from the shore.

The Indians at once seized the remaining boats, of which there were about a dozen, and hurriedly embarked. Impelled by powerful arms, these boats shot out after the fugitives with great rapidity. Jack turned his head to look for the yacht. She was steaming southward with great speed. With the strength of despair, Jack paddled, and so did Dolores. Cocom was but little use with his mutilated hand, but stood up in the bow cursing their pursuers fluently in the Indian tongue.

From the start, they had gained considerably on their pursuers, and fortunately an accident happened, by which three of the canoes, coming into collision, were overturned. The screams and cries of those struggling in the water caused their comrades to pause, and during a few minutes Jack succeeded in placing a longer distance between himself and his pursuers. *The Bohemian* was so near that he could see the Union Jack flying at her masthead, the foam swirling from her bows.

With wild yells to encourage one another, the remaining canoes started again; but, their folly in keeping close together in a mass, impeded their own speed. A good distance stretched between the pursuers and pursued. Cocom stood swearing fluently, Dolores prayed loudly in Spanish, but Jack, with teeth set hard, paddled as though the devil were after him. To lose all when within sight of safety, it would be too terrible; and as he forced the boat along, he kept glancing over his shoulder to look at the course of the yacht. She was standing closer in to shore, and the canoe would cut across her trail in ten minutes or thereabouts.

Those on board had evidently seen a boat was being chased by the Indians, for the sound of a gun broke on their ears.

“Hurrah!” yelled Jack, joyfully. “Philip sees us. Come on, you cursed wretches, I’ll escape you yet.”

Dolores flung down her paddle with a cry. She was completely worn out, and could do no more. Jack did what he could, but the Indians rapidly gained on them. A second gun announced that the yacht was close at hand. So were the Indians now within bow shot. Already some were fitting the arrows to the strings. An idea struck Jack which promised to be their salvation.

“Dolores, the opal! the opal! Hold it up. They dare not fire then.”

She caught his meaning at once, and as the nearest boat drew on, sprang to her feet and held up the great gem. It flashed and sparkled in the sun, and a cry of wonder burst from the lips of their pursuers. The foremost warriors dropped their bows. They recognised the Chalchuih Tlatonac, and superstition, stronger than anything else in their natures, paralysed their arms.

“Señor, the boat!” cried Cocom, joyfully.

Jack turned his head. *The Bohemian* was less, much less, than a quarter of a mile away. Seeing this, the Indians, while forbearing to shoot, made redoubled efforts to catch them before the yacht came up, and thus recover the sacred gem. One boat came within two lengths, when Jack, thinking to dodge and gain time, turned his light craft off to the right. In another two minutes a ball ricocheted across the waves and smashed the foremost boat to pieces. Awestruck at this unexpected event, the others stopped paddling, and in a few minutes the canoe was safe under the bows of the yacht. Philip, Peter, and Rafael were looking over the side at the—as they thought—Indians.

“Philip! Philip!”

“Why! God! It’s Jack!”

“Dolores! Take Dolores on board first,” murmured Jack; then, overcome by all he had passed through, fell back in a faint.

Chapter XXII

Fortune Turns Her Wheel

Frown, Fortune, frown,
For I am much cast down,
And tears do melancholy make my face;
In sable gown,
With sad yew-wreath as crown,
I rail at you,
Oh, Fortune, most untrue,
For that to me, you show not any grace;
Oh, la! fa! la! la!
My Lady Fortune, hear my sigh,
Be kinder to my love and I.
Smile, Fortune, smile,
For I am gay awhile,
And laughter lurks about these lips again;

Now I beguile
My days with cheerful wile,
For from the throng,
Of shepherds gay and strong,
My love hath chosen me to be her swain;
Oh, la! fa! la! la!
My Lady Fortune hear my cry,
How happy are my love and I.

“Baron Munchausen!” said Philip, addressing Jack, with mock solemnity, “this story of thine passeth the comprehension of man. ‘Tis a most rare history, and, were I the Commander of the Faithful, I would have it written in letters of gold on purple parchment.”

It was some hours after their rescue by Philip, and *The Bohemian* was just entering the harbour of Tlatonac. Dolores was sound asleep in Peter’s cabin; and Jack, now transformed to a civilised being, by washing and clothing, was seated in the state-room, narrating his adventures to an attentive audience of three. As for Cocom, he was squatting on the floor with a cigarette in his mouth, grunting approval of Jack’s story—which he told in Spanish, for the benefit of Rafael, and modestly receiving the encomiums lavished on him by the listeners. Philip and Don Rafael frequently interrupted him with exclamations of surprise; but Peter, less skilful in understanding the Castilian tongue, had to keep his attention fixed on every word that fell from Jack’s lips. Under the tutorship of Doña Serafina, the little doctor had made wonderful progress, and now understood the Spanish language fairly well. It was at the conclusion of this most extraordinary story that Philip addressed Jack as “Baron Munchausen.”

“Por todos Santos!” exclaimed Rafael, admiringly, following Philip’s example, “it is wonderful. Mi amigo! I can never thank you sufficiently for all you have done for my cousin. But, perchance,” added the young captain, with a twinkle in his eye, “Dolores has already thanked you herself.”

“Dolores will thank me when we arrive at Tlatonac,” retorted Jack, sipping his wine. “Our circumstances were too perilous, Rafael, to admit of fine compliments.”

“Don Miguel will be pleased!” remarked Peter, in fair Spanish.

“He will be more than pleased, Don Pedro,” cried Rafael, seizing Jack’s hand. “My friend, for this you have done, I feel sure my father will grant you the desire of your heart.”

“Santissima! Let Dolores marry an Americano?”

“And why not, Señor? You have saved her life.”

“Assuredly! But Cocom saved mine, Rafael!”

“For that Cocom shall pass the rest of his days in peace and comfort,” said Philip, looking gratefully at the Indian.

Cocom shook his head with mournful composure.

“The days of Cocom are numbered, Señores. The Doña Dolores showed the opal to the hounds of Ixtlilxochitli. By that they knew that the victim of the cycle, that the guardian of the Chalchuih Tlatonac still live, and have stolen the sacred stone. Cocom aided them to discover the secret way, and Ixtlilxochitli will never forgive that betrayal. I am lost, Señores. I shall die.”

“Es verdad!” exclaimed Rafael, earnestly, “doubtless the Indians of Totatzine will try and kill you, Cocom. But in Tlatonac, under the protection of the opal flag, you are safe!”

“No, Señor Maraquando! I shall die,” repeated Cocom, stolidly.

“Not you!” interposed Jack, patting the old man on the head. “I shall look after you, my friend. You saved my life; I shall save yours. A fair exchange! Hark! a gun!”

“It is from the fort,” said Philip, hastily rising, “we are now in the harbour. Come on deck, Jack. We shall be on shore in another twenty minutes.”

They at once went up, and Jack took off his hat with a reverential expression, when he saw the silvery walls of Tlatonac once more glisten over the blue waters.

“Thank God, who has preserved us through many perils!”

“Amen!” said Philip’s deep voice, behind him “Oh, Jack,” he added, placing his hand on his friend’s shoulder, with deep emotion, “if you only knew what agonies we have undergone, thinking of your fate. When we found you were missing, I wished to go back, at any risk, and headed the yacht for the harbour of Acauhtzin. But that cursed Xuarez turned his guns on us, and, as *The Bohemian* would have been smashed to pieces, we were forced to retreat. What a cur I felt then.”

“You could not help it,” said Jack, patting Philip’s back, kindly. “In an attempt to rescue me, you would only have lost your own lives.”

“I did what I could, Jack. At once I came back to Tlatonac, and implored Don Francisco to send an army to Acauhtzin to your rescue. But it was impossible—the torpederas had not arrived, and there were only some merchant-ships to take men north-ward. Defended, as Acauhtzin was, by the war-ships, such an attempt would have been foolhardy. We were forced to remain inactive at Tlatonac, not knowing if you were dead or alive.”

“And then the war broke out?”

“As I told you; Don Hypolito, with his war-ship, is now besieging Janjalla. Tim, Garibay, General Gigedo, and half the army, are there defending it. Tim wanted to remain and search for you; but I insisted on his going, and told him I would take *The Bohemian* up to Acauhtzin, under the Union Jack, to make inquiries.”

“It was lucky you did that,” said Jack, with a grim smile, “or those Indians would have killed or recaptured us for sure.”

“We did not know it was you,” interposed Peter, who had been listening,—they were conversing in English. “I saw you first, and thought it was only a canoe of Indians being chased by others. Philip thought he would help the supposed Indians, and fired those guns.”

“Peter nearly fainted when we saw who the Indians were,” laughed Philip, slipping his arm within that of Jack’s. “However, ‘all’s well that ends well;’ and here you are, safe and sound with Dolores.”

“And with the opal!”

“Good! I never thought you would have got that stone, Jack. Your luck holds, old fellow. The possession of the opal will give confidence to Tlatonac. Will it not, Rafael?”

“What say you, Señor Felipe?”

“The opal! Its possession will inspire confidence.”

“Of a certainty, mi amigo. Our men will fight like devils, now they know the fortune of the Chalchuih Tlatonac is on the side of the Junta. In the same way, Don Hypolito’s soldiers will lose heart.”

“If they lose the war, that is all I care about. I would like to see that fiend of a Xuarez punished,” said Jack, savagely. “By the way, Philip, I suppose you got no satisfaction at Acauhtzin this trip?”

“No; the forts opened fire, and would not let me enter the harbour. Luckily, the war-ships were all south, as I knew, or we would have been smashed up.”

“The war-ships are bombarding Janjalla, you told me.”

“Yes; we hope, however, that it will hold out till the torpederas go south.”

“Have they arrived?”

“Yonder.”

Philip pointed to the left, and there, under the walls of the fort, lay two long black objects, with stumpy black funnels. More than this, a large ship of some two thousand five hundred tons was anchored close at hand. Jack was astonished to see the change in the port since he had last beheld Tlatonac. Then it was quiet and peaceful-looking, now, what with ships and the two torpedo-boats, black wasps of the ocean, as they were, lying under the walls, the walls themselves spotted with the muzzles of heavy guns, the glitter of arms and uniforms outside the sea-gate, and the blaring of distant trumpets, the roll of drums, the aspect was of the most warlike character. He glanced at the spiteful-looking torpedo-boats, and turning towards Philip, mutely demanded an explanation.

“You see Cholocaca is in the thick of it,” said the baronet, gaily. “You have been away close on three weeks, and during that time neither Don Hypolito nor the Junta have been idle. The former has sent his troops and war-ships to Janjalla, and the latter is busy fixing up the torpederas to have a fight with *The Pizarro* and her consorts down south.”

“But that ship?”

“*The Iturbide*. She is a Cuban mail steamer requisitioned by the Junta, and turned into an armed cruiser for this war. With her and the torpederas, Don Hypolito’s fleet won’t have such a pleasant time as they think.”

“Does Don Rafael command *The Iturbide*?”

“I, mi amigo!” cried Rafael, overhearing this question. “Not I. Yonder torpedo-boat is under my charge, and in that, Don Juan, you must come with me.”

“When do you go south?”

“The day after to-morrow. At the same time regiments march by land to Gigedo, at Janjalla. Oh, the game has begun, Juan, and the opal burns red!”

“It will now burn whatever colour we like,” retorted Jack, shrugging his shoulders. “I saw the way those priests managed the trick. It was—”

"Tim can tell us all that in the patio of Casa Maraquando," interrupted Philip, hastily. "See, the anchor is down, so we had better go ashore at once, and relieve the minds of Don Miguel and the ladies."

"Cocom is already over the side," said Peter, pointing to a small canoe skimming the waves. "You will receive an ovation on your way through the city."

"Greatness is thrust upon me," laughed Jack, who was wonderfully lighthearted now that they were safe, "Where is Doña Dolores?"

"Just coming on deck."

The girl still wore her Indian dress, as Philip, being a bachelor, had no feminine gear on board. She had, however, washed the paint from her face, and looked wonderfully bright and charming in her savage toilette.

"Pocahontas!" said Philip, in Jack's ear, as she approached. "Lucky man. I would I were Captain John Smith."

"What about Eulalia?"

"Oh, I can tell you about Eulalia," murmured Dr. Grench, a trifle maliciously.

"You'll do nothing of the sort, Peter," said Philip, sharply. "I will tell Jack all about it myself. You stick to your beetles and Doña Serafina."

"Doña Serafina!" cried Dolores, overhearing the name. "Oh, Señor Felipe, how I do wish to see my dear aunt."

"In a few minutes, Señorita. See, the boat is waiting. We will all go on shore at once."

"There seems to be a row on shore," remarked Jack, as they climbed down the side of the yacht.

"Dios!" exclaimed Rafael, laughing. "Cocom has told them all. The news is passing from mouth to mouth. Soon it will be all over the city. Harken to the cries, mis amigos."

"Vive el Americano! El opalo! Dios lo pague, Doña Dolores!"

"A shout for one, a shout for all," observed Jack, philosophically. "They should also shout, 'God reward Cocom!' for without Him we would not be here."

They were welcomed on shore by a frantic crowd. The Cholacacans have all the vivacity and impulsiveness of southern nature. Nothing do they love so much as a public demonstration; therefore, on this occasion they gave full rein to their enthusiasm. In their eyes, Jack was a hero, Dolores a heroine, and, accordingly, they were almost stunned with vociferous applause. The fact that the opal, that sacred gem, so inextricably interwoven with the traditions of the Republic, was now in the city itself, wrought them up to a pitch of frenzy. With the Chalchuih Tlatonac in their midst, they could not fail to conquer the rebels; it was the palladium of the Republic, the genius of Tlatonac, and by it would they be enabled to overwhelm their enemies. The superstitious belief they had in the jewel was almost terrible. It glittered on the banners of Cholacaca, it coloured the whole patriotic feelings of the inhabitants. The opal meant victory to its possessors, and, lo! they held it safely in the capital.

Up to the sea-gate the lovers passed, surrounded by their friends. On either side the vast crowd heaved like a great sea. Constant cries saluted Jack, Dolores, the opal; and to show the public that Cocom had spoken truly, Duval whispered a few words to his companion. In a moment she had drawn forth the gem from her breast, and held it up in full sight of the populace. The tumult sank to a dead stillness, as if by magic, and everyone drew a deep breath of awe and admiration as the splendid jewel flashed its lightnings in the sun. A crimson beam flared forth, owing to the position in which it was held by Dolores. It burned in her fingers like a red-hot coal. The crowd, in their superstition, took it as a sign from heaven, and burst out into frenzied cries.

“Guerra! Guerra! El opalo! Guerra! Abajo los rebeledes!”

Then some excited person began chanting the national song of the opal. In a moment the mob caught at the idea, and the great body of sound thundered to the sky.

Kneel at the shrine while the future discerning,
See how the crimson ray strengthens and glows;
Red as the sunset the opal is burning,
Red is prophetic of death to our foes.

“I feel like a victorious general,” said Jack, smiling at all this enthusiasm.

“What a pity Tim isn’t here,” remarked Peter, whose usually meek eyes were flashing like stars behind his spectacles; “he does so like a row.”

“He’ll be having plenty where he is,” said Philip, grimly; “but look at that fellow going to do the Raleigh business with his zarape.”

By this time they had passed into the Calle Otumba, and a frantic young Spaniard, rushing forward, flung his cloak on the ground for Dolores to walk across. The idea pleased the people, and in a few moments the whole way up to the Casa Maraquando was spread with zarapes. Then flowers were flung before them in profusion.

“The primrose path of dalliance,” quoth Philip, laughing. “I hope these excited people won’t throw their bodies next for us to walk over. Don’t be afraid, Doña Dolores. You have your guard of honour to protect you.”

Indeed, this frenzied demonstration rather scared the girl. All the colour faded out of her face, and slipping the opal into her bosom, she shrank terrified against her lover. Jack took her arm within his own and his touch gave her more confidence; but what with the singing, shouting, cloak-flinging, flower throwing, and what not, they both felt quite worn out, and were not at all sorry to at length arrive at the door of the Casa Maraquando.

The news of their arrival had preceded them, as a matter of course, and Don Miguel, with outstretched arms, was waiting in the gateway to receive them. Dolores, with a cry of delight, flung herself on the breast of her uncle, who at once carried her into the patio. Then the rest of the party followed, and the doors were shut against the mob, which still remained in the street, terribly excited. After a time, the tumult quietened down like a sea after a storm, and the throng streamed into the Plaza de los Hombres Ilustres to organise a demonstration to the honour and glory of the Chalchuih Tlatonac and its guardian.

In the patio, Dolores was received with noisy demonstrations by Doña Serafina, and with joyful tears by Eulalia. It was some time, however, before Don Miguel could part from his niece, for he held her to his breast, calling upon all the saints to shower blessings on her head. Never had the stately Spaniard been so

moved, and when he delivered his niece over to the tender embraces of Serafina and Eulalia, he turned towards Jack, with tears in his eyes.

“Señor Juan,” he said, in a voice of emotion, grasping the young man’s hand, “I can never repay you for what you have done. From this moment you may command the services, and the lives of myself and those dear to me.”

He could say no more, but, with a wave of his hand, walked to the other end of the court to conceal his emotion. Jack was scarcely less moved, and as for Dolores, she was being overwhelmed by her cousin and aunt.

“Dear one,” chattered the old lady, noisily; “now that thou art safe, I vow twenty candles to the Virgin, who has thus watched over thee, and to San Juan, who is the patron saint of your preserver.”

“I, also!” cried Eulalia, who had in some mysterious way become possessed of the history. “I vow a jewel to San Felipe, for it was his namesake who preserved them from the Indians.”

Jack and Philip were much gratified by these marks of attention; but Peter, being left out in the cold, was inclined to be cross.

“They might vow a candle or so to San Pedro,” he grumbled, “seeing the whole Church of Rome is under his care.”

“Offer him some beetles, Peter,” said Jack, in the little doctor’s ear; but the suggestion was not received favourably by the entomologist.

Having wept and cried over Dolores to their hearts’ content, the ladies proceeded to lead her away to resume her own dress; but before doing so, both aunt and niece flung themselves on Jack’s neck, and embraced him with fervour. Duval did not mind a kiss from Eulalia, but he objected to the aunt. Nevertheless, as he had to take the bitter with the sweet, he passively submitted to be made much of.

“Caro, Señor! You are an angel from heaven,” cried Serafina, with fervour.

“As valiant as the Cid,” said Eulalia, kissing Jack’s bronzed cheek.

“We will pray for you to the saints.”

“Your face shall be in my soul!”

This last remark came from Eulalia, whereat Philip winced. Seeing this, Jack brought the duet to a speedy end.

“I am your servant, Señoritas! What I have done is nothing, and thanks are rather due to Cocom than to me.”

“But without you, Don Juan, Cocom could not have saved Dolores.”

“And without the boat of Señor Felipe,” added Eulalia, glancing at the baronet, “none of the three would be here.”

Philip made a polite gesture of dissent, though in his heart he was glad that Eulalia inclined so kindly towards him. Then Jack kissed the hands of the ladies in a most gallant fashion, and they, after removing

Dolores once more from the arms of Don Miguel, whither she had flown, led her out of the patio. This being done, while waiting for the evening meal, Don Miguel demanded from Jack an account of his adventures, a request which was at once seconded by Philip, Rafael, and Peter, who protested that they could listen to a dozen repetitions of his hairbreadth escapes. Thus adjured, Jack, with as much suppression of himself as possible, narrated the events which had taken place from the earliest period of his capture by Xuarez down to the present time when he was rescued by Philip. Frequently the story was interrupted by ejaculations from his auditors, and by the time the story was finished they were all furious with Don Hypolito, particularly Señor Maraquando.

“To think, Señor,” he cried, indignantly, “that I have touched the hand of that man. Carambo! To give up a white man to the cursed altar of Huitzilopochtli. It is infamous! It is unheard of!”

“But you forget, Señor, he is a pure-blooded Indian.”

“I ever thought so,” said Rafael, sagely. “There were many ways about Xuarez, my father, that were not those of a Spaniard.”

“Indian or no Indian,” growled Philip, clenching his fist, “if I get within striking distance of the scoundrel, I won’t leave a whole bone in his body.”

“Nor will I,” said the meek Peter, fiercely, “fancy him wanting to lay Jack out on a jasper stone like a corpse on a dissecting-table.”

“Be quiet, you Chamber of Horrors,” said the baronet, angrily, “don’t mention such a thing.”

“There is one great good gained out of much evil,” observed Don Miguel, reflectively; “the possession of the opal strengthens us greatly against Xuarez.”

“How so?” asked Philip, curiously.

“Because this priest, Ixtlilxochitli, will not be able to manage the Indians for him without the stone.”

“I am afraid, Señor, the mischief is done,” said Jack, gravely, “the opal declared war, and now the Indians will join Don Hypolito.”

“It’s a pity we can’t get up a counter prophecy, and make the opal declare peace,” remarked Philip, quietly; “then the Indians would take no part in the war.”

“I fancy that is impossible,” said Miguel, shaking his head. “I would it could be so. If the Indians would only keep quiet, Xuarez would find great difficulty in accomplishing his plans. Should Janjalla fall, and Xuarez concentrate his own men and the Indians before Tlatonac, it will be hard to beat them back.”

“Janjalla will not fall,” cried Rafael, in a fiery tone; “there are brave men defending it. They will hold out till reinforced. The regiments march southward to-morrow, the torpederas and *The Iturbide* go the next day; and between the two we shall conquer these rebels.”

“We will try, at all events, my son,” said Maraquando, smiling at the young man’s enthusiasm; “but, meanwhile, it is best to look on both sides of the question.”

“With the opal stone in Tlatonac, we cannot fail,” declared Jack. “You have seen it, Señor Maraquando?”

“Not yet. Dolores was too agitated to show it to me.”

“Here is my cousin,” said Rafael, rising to his feet. “She brings the opal with her.”

Before he finished the sentence, Dolores, now arrayed in her European dress, entered the patio, followed by Doña Serafina and Eulalia uttering cries of admiration. In her hand she carried the Harlequin Opal, which glittered faintly in the dim light.

“See, uncle!” cried Dolores, placing the gem in Maraquando’s hand, “I give you the luck of Tlatonac.”

“So this is the famous stone?” said Miguel, gazing at the wonderful play of colours, “I do not wonder it is held sacred. So beautiful a jewel I have never yet beheld.”

“There, Señor Maraquando, I disagree with you,” observed Jack, in a nervous voice; “there is a jewel still more beautiful in my eyes—Dolores!”

Don Miguel started and stared in amazement at the young couple, who were now standing hand in hand before him. He could not understand the meaning of either the attitude or speech.

“My brother,” whispered Serafina, seizing the situation with feminine quickness, “it is love!”

“Yes,” said Jack, firmly, “it is love. I have worshipped your niece these many months, Señor Maraquando, but I dared not to tell you of that love, seeing I was an Englishman, a heretic. Now, however, if I have done anything to deserve your gratitude, I ask you, in the presence of my friends, to give your consent to the marriage of Dolores and myself.”

Don Miguel was silent for a few moments, and then turned slowly towards his niece.

“Do you love Don Juan, Dolores?”

She raised her head and looked not at her questioner, but at Jack.

“Yes,” she replied simply, “I have loved him this long time.”

“Señor,” said Maraquando, with great dignity, “it is true you are not of our race; but during the time I have known you I have seen nothing in you but what I admire and respect. In rescuing my niece from the Shrine of the Opal at Totatzine, you have acted like a chivalrous gentleman. To your marriage I gladly give my consent. Take Dolores as your wife, Señor, and with her this.”

He held out for Jack’s acceptance the Harlequin Opal.

Chapter XXIII

Away To The Front

One kiss! ‘tis our last one; the horses await,
And swift through the midnight I ride to my fate.
‘Tis life for thy lover, or death it may be,
But living or dying, my thought is for thee.
Who knows when my arms shall enfold thee again
The future hides ever its joy and its pain.
I leave thee for battle, my dear one, my bride,
And on, through the darkness, I ride, and I ride.
Light hand on the bridle, light heart in my breast,

A bunch of your ribbons flaunt gay on my crest.
I go not in sorrow, but hasten with glee,
To fight for my country, my honour, and thee.
Soon wilt thou in triumph behold me, my sweet,
Return with my laurels to cast at thy feet.
I dream of a future with thee by my side,
As on, through the darkness, I ride, and I ride.

Jack's position was now similar to that of Tantalus. Love was within his reach, yet he dared not to grasp it, for on the next day he was to depart with Don Rafael for Janjalla, in the torpedera *Montezuma*. Peter had also been invited to visit the seat of war, and although a man of peace, decided to go, as he was anxious about Tim. That redoubtable warrior was at Janjalla, with General Ggedo, busily engaged in wiring sensational accounts of the siege to *The Morning Planet*. Tim was particularly anxious that Janjalla should not fall into the hands of Don Hypolito, as it was the spot whence started the telegraph-wires for the south. If Xuarez captured the town, the forces of the Junta would be driven back to Tlatonac, and as likely as not the wires would be cut by the rebels, therefore Tim would be unable to transmit news to England. As it was, he made good use of his time, and took full possession of the telegraph-office in Janjalla.

As to Philip, he decided to march by land with the Regimiento de los Caballeros, of which corps he was now an officer. Colonel Garibay, the commander of the regiment, was already at Janjalla, having been sent there by President Gomez on a special message to General Ggedo. The regiment was, therefore, under the command of Captain Velez, who was a great admirer of Philip, and made much of him. Altogether reinforcements amounting to close on a thousand men were now on their way south, to assist General Ggedo in holding Janjalla, and the torpederas, in company with the armed cruiser *Iturbide*, were to proceed there by sea, in order to destroy, if possible, the three ships of the enemy now bombarding the town.

There was no doubt that the war had begun badly for the Junta, but this was the fault of President Gomez. A more obstinate man never existed, and having made up his mind that Xuarez would attack Tlatonac without delay, he had foolishly withdrawn the garrison from Janjalla, Puebla de los Naranjos, Chichimec, and other towns, for the protection of the capital. It was in vain that Don Miguel, warned by his son, represented that it was more than probable Xuarez would attack Janjalla first, in order to concentrate his troops in the south, and so march them across the plains to Tlatonac. The President refused to take this view of the matter, and by the withdrawal of the garrisons, left the whole of Southern Cholocaca in an unprotected condition.

The effect of this policy was most disastrous. Warned by his spies that but a feeble defence could be offered by Janjalla, Don Hypolito sent southward, without delay, transports filled with troops, and a convoy of the three war-ships. He hoped to capture and garrison Janjalla with his own men before the Junta became aware of his design, and thus secure an important town as the basis of his operations. At Acauhtzin he was hemmed in by mountains, unable to march his troops overland to the capital; but in the south, between Janjalla and Tlatonac were vast alluvial plains, over which he could lead his army. It was his intention to effect a conjunction with the Forest Indians before the walls of the Opal City, and having ordered his war-ships to bombard it by sea, thus attack the capital on two sides at once. Between two fires, he deemed that the city would speedily yield.

Becoming aware that the war-ships had gone south, Don Francisco speedily saw how foolishly he had acted, and ordered five hundred men to at once proceed to Janjalla, to defend it against the rebels. He sent back the troops to garrison the inland towns, and thus hoped to stretch a barrier between the rebels and the capital. The whole danger lay in the south, for as yet the Indians were quiet, and no rising was apprehended on their part, though Jack was doubtful as to the advisability of trusting to appearances. He

quite believed that the campaign would be conducted by Xuarez, as had been prophesied by Don Rafael, and could not help deploring that such an incompetent man as Gomez was at the head of affairs.

“If he would only leave things alone, and not interfere,” he said to Philip, on the eve of departure. “His generals know more about warfare than he does. The man’s an ass.”

“I’m with you there,” replied Philip, heartily; “he has made a muddle of things already. Who but an ass would send only five hundred men to Janjalla, when it is about to be bombarded by three men-of-war, and attacked by two thousand rebel troops? Even this reinforcement is not strong enough. Sending his troops southward in these dribblets will end in their being cut to pieces. I would not be surprised if even now Xuarez was in possession of Janjalla, and, with such a basis for operations, he will make it hot for the Republic.”

“What do you think ought to have been done?”

“I was speaking to Colonel Garibay, and we both came to the same conclusion. Don Francisco ought to have taken the warning of Rafael, and concentrated most of the troops at Janjalla. The capital is well defended by its forts, and can look after itself. Janjalla, on the other hand, is in no fit state of defence to resist the heavy guns of three ships pounding at its walls. As I take it, the great aim should be to prevent Don Hypolito from getting a footing in the south by capturing Janjalla. Then he would have nothing but the sea and Acauhtzin for a field of operations. In the north, owing to the mountains, he can do nothing, and now we have the torpederas, he cannot have it all his own way at sea.”

“Well, and supposing he captures Janjalla?”

Philip shrugged his shoulders.

“The result is plain enough. Instead of mountains between this and Tlatonac, he has nothing but plains on which he can manœuvre his troops. He will either capture the intervening towns or seduce them to his cause. Then he will arrive at Tlatonac, and while he is besieging it from the inland, his fleet will bombard it from the sea.”

“That is if the torpederas don’t sink his ships.”

“Of course! I am talking of the campaign from Don Hypolito’s point of view. But one thing is certain. If he captures Janjalla, this war may be prolonged for months. Think of the ruin that will mean to the country.”

Philip spoke truly. Hitherto Cholocaca had enjoyed immunity from the horrors of war. From the year 1840, when under the leadership of Zuloaga, the Republic had thrown off the yoke of Spain, there had been peace for a period of forty-five years. Those fratricidal wars which constantly convulsed the communities of South America were not to be found in the history of Cholocaca. The Republic kept well within her borders, was at peace with her neighbours, and under the rule of wise rulers, devoted herself to improving her material condition.

It was true that a greater part of the country consisted of wild forests filled with unconquered Indians, but the Cholocacans had always been able to keep these savages at bay. The coast-line of the north, the immense alluvial plains of the south, were thoroughly civilised, and covered with thriving towns. The two secondary capitals, Janjalla in the south, Acauhtzin in the north, looked up to and respected their powerful sister city, Tlatonac, who held her seat in the central portion of the sea-board. Yet it must be admitted that they bore a grudge against her, as nearly all the commerce of the country poured into her walls, from thence to be distributed over the civilised world. Why should Tlatonac be the capital when they were each

equally suited for the post? They had rich countries behind them, they exported goods far and wide, they had their municipal institutions, their walls, ramparts, palaces, and magnificent churches. Why, therefore, should they be forced to send their ships to the port of Tlatonac, there to pay toll and custom duties? The Junta had constituted Tlatonac the starting-point of all vessels, and according to law, ships from the north and south were forced, both in going and coming, to report themselves at the capital. By this means Tlatonac dominated her sister cities, and held them firmly under her thumb.

The reason that Tlatonac was chosen to be the capital by Zuloaga was very plain. It was situated in the centre of the coast-line, and thus commanded equally the north and the south. It had been the shrine of the opal, and the traditions of that stone closely interwoven with the history of the country. Greatest reason of all, the harbour was the finest in Cholocaca. Moreover, roads from most of the inland towns diverged to the capital, thus rendering communication easy; while Janjalla, environed by swamps, and Acauhtzin girdled by forests, were more or less shut off from the heart of the country. When inland traders could transport their goods to Tlatonac at half the cost they could take them to either of the other two towns, it was not likely, from a commercial point of view, that they would ever forsake the capital. Under the circumstances, it can well be seen that Gomez had good reason to doubt the fidelity of Janjalla. The northern town had, through jealousy of Tlatonac, sided with the rebels, and it was just possible that the southern city might follow suit. The only thing in favour of Janjalla remaining faithful was that while both towns were jealous of the capital, they were equally jealous of one another. The populace of Janjalla knew well that if Xuarez conquered that he would transfer the seat of Government to Acauhtzin out of gratitude for its help, and would certainly not assist a cause calculated to elevate a rival city.

The Republic was very wealthy. She exported tobacco, coffee, cacao, cotton, rice, maize, and cattle. Her plains were covered with grain, her mountains were rich in ores, and her population extremely industrious. With the exception of the area covered by the forests, the whole country was cultivated, and now the formation of a railway through the forests, up to Acauhtzin promised the opening up of the northern lands. Already fifty miles of railway had pierced the enormous belt of timber lying between Acauhtzin and the capital. From the main line, branches were to extend to the different towns, so as to connect them with the seat of Government. Unfortunately, all this promise of prosperity was now interrupted by the war.

There was no doubt that Don Hypolito was a source of infinite trouble to the country. This Indian coming from the sacred city of Totatzine, was now revenging himself on the descendants of the Conquistadores, for their treatment of his ancestors. He had no genuine cause for dissatisfaction, as at the time when he raised the standard of revolt, the country was thoroughly prosperous. The wealth gained by the exports of the Republic was used by her Presidents to open up the interior of the continent, and to supply Tlatonac with all the refinements of civilisation. The army was well drilled, well clothed, well armed. The walls of the city were built on the most approved system of engineering science, the principal squares were lighted by electricity, millions had been expended on drainage, in the formation of interior roads, in the construction of the proposed railway to Acauhtzin. The Republic had even formed the nucleus of a navy, and had already three war-ships in hand, and two torpederas coming, when the war broke out.

Now the war-ships had revolted to Xuarez, the northern capital was bound to his cause, and this ambitious Indian, assuming the name and race of a Spaniard, had plunged the country into what promised to be a disastrous war. The effect was ruinous. Business was at a standstill, exports were stopped, the capital was declared in a state of siege, and the whole country resounded with the tramp of armies, the clash of arms, the thunder of cannon. Industry was paralysed, and many of the country-people crowding to the capital, rendered food dear. To avoid the horrors of famine and ruin which threatened the Republic, it was absolutely necessary that Xuarez should be crushed at once.

President Gomez was no warrior certainly, but he was a judicious ruler—in time of peace. He saw at once the terrible calamities likely to ensue should the war be prolonged, and already regretted his folly in not taking the advice of Don Miguel. So far as was possible, he repaired his mistakes. A thousand men were

sent to the relief of Janjalla by land, and *The Iturbide*, in company with the torpederas, left for the seat of war by sea. If the reinforcements could succour Janjalla in time, if the torpederas could sink the rebel ships, then there would be some hope of the war being brought to a speedy conclusion. But as it was, the whole danger lay in the probability of Don Hypolito capturing Janjalla, from whence he could threaten the capital and intervening towns.

Jack was very anxious that Philip should come with him in *The Montezuma*, but the baronet was obstinately set on going with his regiment.

"I shall be in Janjalla before you, Jack; for between you and the town lie the war-ships, while we have but to march across those easy plains in safety."

"Yes, if the Indians don't stop you."

"Nonsense; there is no chance of that."

"I am not so certain, Philip. Don Hypolito has his spies, as you know; and when he hears that reinforcements are advancing southward, he will probably send word to Ixtlilxochitli to have them intercepted. As you know, the plains are fringed to the west by the forests, so the Indians could break out from thence, and perhaps exterminate the troops."

"What! exterminate a thousand soldiers, armed with rifles? Impossible!"

"Well, it does seem impossible. However, as you won't come with me, go as you please. We shall meet at Janjalla."

"Of course. I shall see you from the walls being chased, by *The Pizarro* and *The Cortes*."

They were talking in the patio of the Casa Maraquando, and Philip was tricked out in all the bravery of his uniform. He looked remarkably handsome and Eulalia sighed as she thought he was about to leave her. All coquetry had been laid aside, and she had confessed that she was deeply in love with the Americano. Philip fully returned her affection, and intended, on returning from Janjalla, to ask Don Miguel to permit them to be married on the same day as Jack and Dolores. Turning away from Jack, he caught sight of Eulalia's pensive face, and heard her plaintive little sigh. In an instant he was by her side.

"Querida," he whispered tenderly, "you must not be sad. I go forth to bring home laurels to lay at your feet."

"I would rather you were at my feet, Felipe," sobbed Eulalia. "This horrid war! I am sure you will be killed, and then I shall die. Oh yes, mi alma, I shall assuredly die."

They were standing in a secluded corner of the patio. Neither Don Miguel or Serafina were in sight, so Philip, taking advantage of the situation, kissed Eulalia once, twice, thrice. It was true Jack and Dolores were not far off, but they were too busy with each other to take much notice. Eulalia sobbed on Philip's breast, vowed she would die if he left her, told him to march forth and be a hero at once, commanded him to remain at Tlatonac, ordered him to depart for Janjalla, and thus contradicting herself every moment, smiled and wept in turns. Finally, she produced a little gold cross.

"This is for thee, my own one," she whispered slipping it into his hand. "It has been blessed by Padre Ignatius. Nought can hurt thee while the sacred thing is on thy heart."

Philip kissed the cross, kissed Eulalia, and swore he would never part with it throughout the campaign. In the middle of their tender leave-taking, a trumpet pealed forth in the Plaza de los Hombres Ilustres. It was the signal for departure.

"I must go! Farewell, my dear one. Watch from the azotea, and let your face be the last thing I behold in Tlatonac."

"Adios, mi alma," murmured Eulalia, and embraced him fondly, after which, Philip, turning hastily away, shook hands with Jack, and kissed the hands of Dolores and Serafina, the latter of whom had just entered the patio.

"Adieu, dear ladies. Good-bye, Jack. Take care of yourself, and don't be carried off to any more Indian cities. We meet at Philippi. Adios!"

With a wave of his hand he was gone, and Jack escorted the ladies to the azotea to watch the regiments departing. The Plaza was crowded with soldiers and women, the latter taking tearful leave of those marching to the front. President Gomez, attended by a brilliant staff, among whom Jack saw Don Miguel and his son, made a speech full of fire and patriotism, which caused the utmost enthusiasm. Then the banners of the different regiments were unfurled, the bands began to play the March of Zuloaga, and the soldiers began to file out of the square by the Calle Otumba.

Regiment after regiment marched past, through streets wreathed with flowers, amid tears, cheers, and wavings of handkerchiefs. The house-tops were crowded with ladies looking down on the troops. They made a gallant show as they tramped along with waving plumes and glittering arms. The cavalry soldiers came first, and those on the azotea of the Casa Maraquando saw Sir Philip riding by the side of Captain Velez, at the head of the Regimiento de los Caballeros. The banners streamed in the air, the horses champed their bits, and proudly pawed the earth, and, one vast rainbow of hues, this splendid body of men moved majestically past. Philip was riding with his drawn sword sloping over his shoulder, and as he passed the Casa Maraquando, looked up, and saluted the ladies. Eulalia hastily snatching a bunch of jasmine from her breast, let it drop when he was directly underneath. The baronet dexterously caught it, and pressing a kiss on the blossoms, fastened them in his jacket. In another minute or so, he disappeared round the corner of the street on the way to the Puerta de la Culebra, from whence the troops marched southward to Janjalla.

After the disappearance of Philip, Eulalia took no further interest in the proceedings of the day, and retired to her room, followed by Dolores, who strove to console her. Jack not caring for the sole companionship of Doña Serafina, excused himself on the plea that he wanted to ride after the troops and give Philip a message to Tim. Doña Serafina graciously permitted him to depart, and he dashed out of the house, flung himself on his horse, which was waiting at the door, and was about to ride towards the Puerta de la Culebra when Don Rafael came riding at full speed out of the Plaza! The young man seemed much excited, and in his headlong rush knocked down two or three people, so crowded was the street. Never heeding their cries, he raced past Jack, waving his hand.

"To *The Montezuma*, mi amigo! News of the war-ships."

Anxious to know what fresh event had taken place, and fearful that Janjalla had fallen, Jack spurred his horse after Rafael, and at a break-neck speed they clattered down the street to the sea-gate scattering the crowd in every direction.

Outside the sea-gate, Rafael headed to the left, where the torpedera *Montezuma* was lying, and jumping off his horse, threw the reins to a peon, and called a boat. Jack followed his example, and in a few moments they were pulling for the torpedo-vessel.

“Carambo mi amigo!” said Jack, breathlessly, “you ride like the devil. What is the matter now?”

“His Excellency has just received news that two of the war-ships have returned to Acauhtzin.”

“What! Have they given up the siege?”

“No. They are acting as convoy to the transports. Xuarez is sending more troops south, and, knowing that our torpederas are not ready, thinks that *The Pizarro*, single-handed, is sufficient to blockade Janjalla.”

“Then he has landed his other troops?” said Jack, as they sprang on board *The Montezuma*. “The ship guns have evidently silenced the forts, and permitted the rebels to get on shore.”

“Precisely! But what matter? Reinforcements are now on their way by land, and we, my friend, will start to-morrow by sea to smash up *The Pizarro*.”

“Will the torpederas be ready?”

“They must be ready!” cried Rafael, stamping his foot. “We may never get such another chance. If we can only sink *The Pizarro*, it will dishearten the troops of Xuarez now besieging Janjalla, and they can be easily defeated.”

“If we can manage that, it will be a sad blow to Don Hypolito!”

“Dios! so I should think,” replied Rafael, laughing gaily. “He will come south with more troops, and find Janjalla occupied by us, and his way barred by two torpederas and *The Iturbide*. Then *The Pizarro*’s loss won’t please him. Carajo! no.”

“Bueno! But you forget *The Pizarro* has search-lights, torpedo-netting—”

“Not the last, mi amigo!” interrupted Rafael quickly. “I told you before, the netting was left behind in Tlatonac when the war-ships left for Acauhtzin. As to the search-lights, she can keep them on *The Iturbide* or on the other torpedera. Then, my friend, *The Montezuma* will make things unpleasant for her.”

“It’s a mere chance, Rafael!”

“Quien sabe!” retorted the young man, shrugging his shoulders; “all warfare is mere chance. Come and look over the boat.”

As the fittings of the torpederas were somewhat complicated, engineers had been sent out from England in charge, and these, being paid heavily by the Junta, remained to manœuvre the boats. Among them Jack discovered a Scotchman, from Aberdeen, with whom he struck up a friendship. This gentleman, whose clan was Mackenzie, showed them all over the boat, and spoke in terms of great affection of the Whitehead torpedoes.

“Eh, mon!” he observed to Jack, as they surveyed those triumphs of modern warfare, “jouist gie her a shove, an’ she’ll smash the hail boatie to bits—into sma’ bits.”

“That is if the ship you propose to smash doesn’t bring her heavy guns to bear on this boat.”

“Hoots! hoots! mon. *The Montyzumy* can gang her ain gait. Nineteen knots an hour! Ma certie, it wud tack a braw gun to catch the likes o’ her.”

When they returned on deck from their inspection of the ship, a note was brought to Rafael, from Captain Pedraza, of *The Iturbide*, requesting his presence on board. They dropped into a boat, and were speedily clambering up the giant sides of the cruiser. Being conducted to the state-room, they found Captain Pedraza, surrounded by his officers, reading a message from the President.

“Ola mis amigos!” cried the captain, gaily, “you are just in time. Señor Juan, I am your servant. Don Rafael, we leave Tlatonac for Janjalla to-morrow afternoon.”

“Why in the afternoon?”

“Carambo. So as to reach Janjalla at night. *The Pizarro* is lying there in the harbour, and, under cover of darkness, we may be able to sink her either with our guns or by means of torpedoes.”

“Will the torpederas be ready?” asked Jack, for the second time.

“You may be certain of that,” said Rafael, significantly. “I will guarantee that *The Montezuma* will be able to start at the appointed time.”

“And I can say the same of *The Zuloaga*,” observed a slim man, in whom Jack recognised the commander of the other torpedo-boat. “I think, Señor, it can be looked on as certain that all three can depart.”

After this a babel of talk ensued concerning the chances of surprising *The Pizarro*. Some proposed one place, some another, and amid all the excitement, Jack, growing weary of the arguing, slipped out of the saloon, and went ashore, so as to have as much time as possible with Dolores before departure.

He strolled along the sea-shore, and met Cocom just outside the sea-gate. The old man saluted him gravely—

“Señor,” he said, mysteriously approaching Jack; “beware of Ixtlilxochitli.”

“What do you mean, Cocom?” asked Duval, rather startled.

“The Indians, Señor, are now on the war-path—to the south,” added Cocom, significantly.

“Great Heaven!” ejaculated the young man, horror-struck. “They intend to surprise the reinforcements.”

“That is so, Señor. But I, Cocom, have sent runners after them to warn the Señors.”

“Bueno! Cocom, you are the safeguard of Cholocaca!”

“Not I, Señor; but the Chalchuih Tlatonac!”

“Oh, I haven’t much belief in that.”

“Don Juan!” said Cocom, significantly; “the Indians obeyed the stone implicitly—it is sacred. What it speaks they do. Red is burned and war was proclaimed. But, Señor, if it flamed blue, then would the Indians be at peace.”

Before Jack could say a word, Cocom mysteriously slipped away, leaving the young man sorely puzzled as to his meaning.

“That confounded opal,” he said, as he resumed his way towards the Casa Maraquando, “it meets one at every turn. They say opals are unlucky, and certainly the Chalchuih Tlatonac has not brought much luck to us as yet.”

Chapter XXIV

A Naval Engagement—New Style

“Wot! fightin’?” said the sailor man to me
(He was wooden-legged and close on eighty-three).
“Why, bless ‘ee, sir, who knows what fightin’ are,
When iron pots is classed as men-of-war,
And kittles sail the sea without a spar?
Such wessels were not seen at Trafalgar.”
“Old Nelson!” said the sailor man to me
(He was lying like a hatter, I could see).
“I was with him when the Frenchies’ line we broke,
With our wooden ships and sailors’ hearts of oak,
And the great three-decker’s cannon’s voice awoke,
Every minute as they thundered thro’ the smoke.”
“Oh, blow it!” said the sailor man to me
(His language, I admit, was rather free),
“Now you sends a black torpedo, and it seeks
To hit a wessel sideways—then she leaks,
And sinks while every sailor prays and shrieks,
Wot fightin’—why, it’s murder! yah! the sneaks.”

On leaving Cocom, Jack at once went to Don Miguel and informed him of the Indian rising. Maraquando thought but little of the affair, as it was unlikely unarmed savages would dare to attack a force of one thousand soldiers. Besides, the journey to Janjalla was through a civilised and cultivated country, and an Indian raid was improbable. Nevertheless, at Jack’s urgent request, he spoke to President Gomez about the matter, and though his Excellency took the same view as did Maraquando, yet he sent on messengers to overtake the reinforcements and inform them of their possible danger.

The next day at three o’clock the vessels were to leave for Janjalla, but when the hour came it was found that the torpederas were far from ready. It is true *The Iturbide* was in a state of efficiency, and could have left Tlatonac at the appointed time, but the complicated engines of *The Montezuma* and *The Zuloaga* were somewhat out of gear. Though the engineers worked day and night to get everything in order, yet it was not until three days had elapsed that the squadron was ready to start. This delay made Rafael feel very uneasy lest the consorts of *The Pizarro* should return south before they could sink her by the torpedoes. He reckoned out the matter with Jack.

“Dios, mi amigo! Three days have gone since *The Cortes* and *The Columbus* passed Tlatonac with the transports to the north. It is three hundred miles to Acauhtzin, and those boats steam at the rate of twelve knots an hour—”

“True,” interrupted Jack, significantly; “but the transports do not.”

“That is so, Juan. Let us reckon accordingly. Steaming at the rate of twelve knots, the war-ships would probably reach Acauhtzin in twenty-five hours. Allowing for the slowness of the transports say thirty hours. In twenty-four hours they will be able to take in troops, provisions, horses and guns. That makes fifty-four hours. Steaming south to Tlatonac thirty hours. Eighty-four hours. To Janjalla from here it is a

hundred miles—say twelve hours. In all ninety-six hours. Divide by twenty-four, that is exactly four days.”

“At that rate, the rebel ships cannot possibly reach Janjalla before to-morrow midnight. When do we leave here?”

“About three o’clock,” said Rafael, glancing at his watch. “The torpederas can knock out eighteen knots, but the full speed of *The Iturbide* is fifteen. We will reckon at that, so by leaving here at three can reach Janjalla long before midnight.”

“Bueno! We shall have a clear twenty-four hours in which to sink *The Pizarro*.”

“Twelve,” contradicted Rafael, captiously, “we must attack in the darkness. The less risk the better.”

“I don’t see that it makes much difference,” retorted Jack, grimly, “if *The Pizarro* can fight two torpedo boats and an armed cruiser she is a mighty clever ship. I look upon *The Pizarro* as lost.”

“So do I, Juan,” replied Rafael, with a sad expression flitting across his face, “she was my ship, you know. I am sorry that it falls to my lot to sink her.”

“Perhaps she will surrender.”

“Not while she is commanded by De Galvez. He was my first lieutenant, and is as obstinate as the devil. Dios! There is noon. We have not much time in which to make our adieux. Go up and see Dolores, mi amigo, but return by two o’clock.”

Jack gladly took advantage of the permission and had a long interview with Dolores, who wept bitterly at the idea of parting with him again. She was already low-spirited, through having comforted Eulalia, and now that her own lover was going away broke down entirely.

“Promise me you will take the greatest care of yourself, querido.”

“My dearest, I will ask Rafael to wrap me in cotton wool. But, indeed, cara, you need not fear. I will be as safe on board *The Montezuma* as in Tlatonac.”

“But you will be gone many days.”

“A week at the most. If we succeed in sinking *The Pizarro* we will steam north to meet the other war-ships, and try our luck with them.”

“I will pray for you, Juanito, and I will look after the beetles of Don Pedro.”

Jack burst out laughing at the incongruity of such coupling.

“Has Don Pedro asked you to look after that rubbish!”

“Yes, Juanito! I am to take the very greatest care. They are precious.”

“In the doctor’s eyes they are more precious than the opal. By the way, where is Peter?”

“He has said farewell, and departed with my uncle. Would I could come down to the boat, querido. But I dare not.”

“I never knew such particular people as the Tlatonacians,” muttered Jack, somewhat vexed. “Well, angelito, we must say good-bye here.”

“Will you take the opal for good fortune, Juan?”

“I? Take the opal? My dear Dolores, I would be frightened out of my life at carrying such a treasure with me. No! No! You keep the opal with yourself, and yourself in Tlatonac. Then will the good fortune of the city be assured. But I will take this ring.”

“Turquoise! rubies! pearls!” said Dolores, drawing it off her finger. “It was my mother’s, querido. Now it is yours.”

“A thousand thousand thanks, alma de mi alma!” replied Jack, slipping it on his little finger, “it will remind me ever of you. Rubies for your lips, pearls for your teeth, and—and—”

“Ah! and what for turquoise?” said Dolores, seeing he was rather nonplussed, “for my eyes?”

“No, those are black! Well, we will say turquoise for peace. The blue ray of the opal means peace. And now, good-bye, my dearest—my own one!”

“Adios, Juanito. My soul! My heart!”

Jack, not trusting himself to speak further, kissed her passionately, and hastily left the house. Fortunately, he met no one, much to his gratification, as he was too agitated to say a word. He went to his house, and put all his necessities together, then, in company with Peter, went on board *The Montezuma*.

At three o’clock the forts saluted the squadron, and *The Iturbide*, followed by the torpederas, stood out to sea. The crowd on the beach watched the vessels until they were mere specks on the horizon, and then retreated within the walls, with loudly expressed hopes that they would return with the rebel ship in tow. The Tlatonacians expected much more than they were ever likely to obtain.

The three vessels stood out about ten miles from the coast, and steamed southward at no great speed, as Pedraza did not wish to fetch Janjalla until darkness had set in. As two warships and the transports had gone to Acauhtzin, it was probable that *The Pizarro* would be the only vessel left in the harbour, and vigilant watch would be kept on board, lest the torpederas should come on her unawares. The rebel commander knew perfectly well that the torpederas had arrived, and would soon be in chase of his ships; but he did not expect that they would be able to attack while the other war-ships were away. Still, it was probable *The Pizarro* would make good use of her search-lights, and Pedraza, wishing to come to close quarters unexpectedly, had to exercise the greatest care as they drew near the harbour.

Towards nine o’clock they were off the coast of Janjalla, and intense excitement prevailed on board all three vessels. The plan of attack had been settled at a general counsel on board *The Iturbide* before they left Tlatonac, and it was arranged as follows. *The Iturbide* was to steam silently into the harbour of Janjalla, followed by the torpederas, and come to close quarters with *The Pizarro*, if possible. Should she be discovered by the search-light of the latter, she was then to steam boldly ahead, and concentrate the attention of the rebels on herself. *The Pizarro*, thus being busy with the cruiser, would not notice the torpederas, which could then steal silently within five hundred yards, and launch a Whitehead or so. The result would be obvious.

The torpederas, with twin screws and powerful engines, manœuvred with wonderful rapidity, darting here and there in the darkness like black sharks. Both were armed with Hotchkiss guns and four Whitehead torpedo-tubes, while their strong search-lights protected them against the unexpected approach of an enemy. Painted a dark colour to escape notice, they could steal silently within striking distance of a vessel, and sink her with one of their deadly explosives. The only chance of safety for *The Pizarro* lay in her sighting them at a considerable distance, and keeping them at bay with her heavy guns; but as she would be fully taken up with *The Iturbide*, this would be difficult for her to do. Worst of all, she had no defence against the rapid darting torpederas, as the nets had been left behind in Tlatonac, when she deserted to the rebel Xuarez.

As to the cruiser, she was a handsome vessel, with a spar deck, and filled with bow chasers and Gatling guns. She carried a crew of ninety men including officers, and also two hundred soldiers, who had embarked at Tlatonac to be landed, if possible, at Janjalla. Fifteen knots was her usual speed; but, if necessary, she could stand to seventeen. This was the fleet of the Junta, and now manœuvred ten miles from the town of Janjalla, waiting the signal to pounce down on the unsuspecting *Pizarro*.

Fortunately the night was cloudy and dark. At intervals the moon, emerging from behind heavy clouds, cast a pale light over the scene. It was far down in the west, and would soon drop behind the low-lying shore, so Pedraza, who wanted complete darkness for his project, waited until her disappearance before he gave the signal to steam into the harbour. All lights were extinguished on the vessel, so as to avoid attracting the attention of the enemy, but, if necessary, the search-lights could blaze forth in an instant. The torpederas were to attack the warship, one on the port, the other on the starboard side. It was now close upon midnight, and as the moon showed but half her orb above the shore, all waited the signal in breathless silence.

“What is to be done if we sink *The Pizarro*?” asked Jack, as he stood by Rafael, watching for the signal from *The Iturbide*.

“Quien sabe!” replied Maraquando, shrugging his shoulders, “I expect we will wait in the harbour till daylight, and then see if we can land our troops.”

“There won’t be much chance of that, my Comandante,” said Duval, drily; “between us and Janjalla two thousand rebel troops lie encamped. We cannot break through that barrier.”

“You forget, mi amigo, there are close on a thousand troops of the Junta in the town. By this time the reinforcements must have reached their destination, so that will make two thousand. If they attack the rebels from Janjalla, and we land our two hundred men under cover of *The Iturbide*’s guns, who knows but what we may not be able to crush these scoundrels before their warships and transports arrive from Acaultzin.”

“Bueno! Always presuming that the reinforcements have arrived safely. I fear the Indians.”

“Carambo! Surely a thousand well-armed soldiers are a match for a horde of naked savages. The reinforcements are safe in Janjalla by now. I am sure of it. Believe me, Don Juan, we shall exterminate the rebels.”

“First we shall have to exterminate *The Pizarro*, and—”

“Hold!” interrupted Rafael joyfully, “the signal.”

A rocket shot up from *The Iturbide* and scattered its fires in the dark air. The moon had entirely disappeared, and an intense gloom prevailed over land and sea.

Hardly had the rocket's trail of fire disappeared when *The Iturbide's* screw began to spin and followed by the torpederas she moved cautiously towards the harbour at half speed. At the end of an hour all three vessels were within sight of the town. Through the gloom sparkled the lights of Janjalla, and between them and the incoming vessels lay the huge bulk of *The Pizarro*, the glare of her search-lights shooting up into the dark like two gigantic swords of pale flame.

The Iturbide was leading by three hundred yards, and crept cautiously forward so as to pounce on her prey unawares. Whether the noise of her screw reached the ears of those on board *The Pizarro*, or that they marked her coming through the darkness, it is impossible to say, but just as she steamed within eight hundred yards, the search-lights swept round like the spokes of a wheel and in a moment their glare revealed her whereabouts. In the radiance she stood out like a phantom ship, and seeing that he was discovered, Pedraza cracking on all steam, swept past *The Pizarro* in a wide circle.

A heavy fire was at once opened by the rebels and they doubtless deemed that this foe was not alone, for keeping one light on the cruiser, they swept the sea with the other in search of her possible companions. Those on board *The Iturbide* could hear the yell of mingled rage and terror, as the light struck the low bulk of *The Zuloaga* darting through the water, evil looking and venomous. A broadside was poured on the torpedera, now left unprotected by *The Iturbide* which was circling to the left in the inner part of the bay. Owing to the dexterity of *The Zuloaga's* manœuvring, none of the heavy guns could hit her. She skimmed the grey waves at full speed like a swallow, and the search light of *The Pizarro* was much put to in following her. It was like a dancer in the theatre followed by the lime light. One moment the torpedera would be swallowed up in the gloom, the next moment the darting ray of the electric light would stab through the darkness and pick her out. The other ray followed *The Iturbide*, which kept steaming slowly backwards and forwards on the port side, firing her Armstrongs whenever she got a fair chance.

The Zuloaga sent off a bow torpedo, but it passed harmlessly under the stern of *The Pizarro* without doing any damage. Nevertheless, the crew of the rebel ship seemed much alarmed, as well they might be, seeing that a single torpedo striking them amidships would sink their iron ship in a few minutes. Foolishly enough, it never occurred to De Galevez to sweep the starboard with his lights, and he was quite unaware that a second torpedo-vessel was stealing up in the darkness.

Indeed, what with following *The Iturbide* and *The Zuloaga* with his search-lights, De Galevez had enough to do, and kept the torpedo boat at bay with his heavy guns. Occasionally a shot from *The Iturbide* would pass through the rigging of the rebel ship, but no damage was done, and De Galevez's great desire was to keep at a distance the wasp-like torpedo which circled round rapidly, everywhere trying to plant its sting.

While this drama was taking place on the port side, *The Montezuma*, on seeing *The Iturbide* was discovered, moved up on the starboard at a distance of four hundred yards. When abreast of *The Pizarro* she slowed down her engines and crept up within pistol range. Had it not been for the incessant firing of the guns, those on board *The Pizarro* would surely have become aware of their danger. As it was, they thought themselves safe while they kept *The Zuloaga* at a distance. A tremendous broadside was directed at that torpedera and at *The Iturbide*. It was her last discharge, for the next moment she was struck amidships by a torpedo from *The Montezuma*.

There was a cry of frenzied fear, and the search lights flashed round to starboard only to see *The Montezuma* slipping back into the gloom. Three minutes afterwards *The Pizarro* sank.

The vessels of the Junta at once flashed their electric rays on the spot, and where a moment before had been a magnificent vessel, now saw nothing but a wide expanse of cold black sea dotted with drowning men. Boats were lowered by *The Iturbide* and a few soldiers and sailors were rescued, but so suddenly had *The Pizarro* gone down that, with the exception of half a dozen survivors, the whole crew, officers, and soldiers, in all three hundred men, were drowned.

It would be impossible to describe the joy on board the loyalist ships at this successful termination of the contest. Rafael and Jack went on board *The Iturbide* to receive the congratulations of Pedraza for their success, and the officers of *The Zuloaga* also hastened to participate in the general joy. The large state-room of the cruiser was one mass of excited men, drinking champagne, and wildly embracing one another. This victory would surely damp the enthusiasm of the rebels, and raise that of the loyalists to fever pitch. Don Hypolito had now but two ships of war, and these could not surely stand before the valour of *The Iturbide*, with her two torpedo-vessels. The *vivas* were deafening, and Rafael, as commander of the boat which had sunk *The Pizarro*, was nearly stifled by the embraces of his brother officers.

As soon as the excitement had somewhat subsided, all went on deck, and *The Iturbide* stood in to the shore with the idea of seeing how matters stood in the rebel camp. Flying the Opal flag, lest the forts should open fire on one of their own vessels, the cruiser turned her lights on to the beach, and saw that it was lined with the rebel forces, all under arms. The noise of the firing and the flashing of the lights had attracted the attention of those on shore, and fearing that an attack was contemplated by the enemy, those rebels encamped in front of Janjalla were now on the alert. No one could understand the reason of this sea-fight, as it seemed quite impossible that the torpederas could have arrived from Tlatonac in so short a period. The general in command of the troops of Xuarez did not know what to think, and had to wait till dawn before he could make up his mind what course to pursue.

As the lights of *The Iturbide* struck the distant town, a long line of walls, surmounted by a crowd, leaped out of the darkness. The search-lights from the forts were flashed on to the ships, and those in Janjalla recognising the Opal flag, cheered vociferously. They saw three boats, each flying the ensign of Tlatonac, and no *Pizarro*. Then they guessed what had occurred, and were glad accordingly. The rebel soldiers on the beach stamped and swore with rage as they saw their loss, but being without boats could do nothing save parade under arms till dawn, so as to be prepared against a possible attack by the victorious loyalists.

“Bueno!” cried Captain Pedraza, who had his night glass up. “There is one good thing, mis amigos, the Opal flag still flies over the town, so as yet it holds out.”

“What is next to be done, Comandante?” asked Jack, who was standing near with Rafael.

“We must wait till dawn, Señor Americano, and then find out if the reinforcements have arrived at Janjalla. Afterwards we will steam back to Tlatonac, and if possible meet the *Cortes* and *Columbus* coming back. In any event, we must go to Tlatonac to report this victory to the Junta.”

“Shall you land these two hundred troops?”

“Caranto! Why not?”

“Because the camp of the enemy lies between the town and ourselves. Two hundred men cannot do much against two thousand.”

“True, Señor. If it is impossible, we will not attempt it. But at dawn, I will signal to General Gigedo to make a sally from the gates down to the shore; our men will land, and effect a conjunction, and so with small loss they ought to get into the town. Especially under cover of our guns, and those of the forts.”

“I don’t see what use that will be, Pedraza,” interrupted Rafael, bluntly.

“Caro, Señor! His Excellency ordered this to be done, so it must be done.”

“Rather a useless task, I think,” said Jack, dryly. “However, I am not sorry, as I wish to get into the town myself. But you, Señor Comandante, what will you do?”

“Wait till these troops are safe with Gigedo, and also ascertain if the reinforcements have arrived. Then I shall sail north.”

“You won’t wait for the warships and transports?”

“Carajo! what use? We shall find those on our way to Tlatonac.”

After this conversation, Rafael and Jack returned on board *The Montezuma*, the former slightly gloomy in spite of the victory so unexpectedly achieved.

“Caro, Juan!” he said, reflectively; “if we lose this war, it will be through Don Francisco Gomez. He is a good politician, but a bad general. What use is there to sacrifice two hundred men to-morrow?”

“It’s rather like the Charge of the Light Brigade, certainly,” replied Jack, with a smile; “as foolhardy and as brave.”

“What is that, mi amigo?”

Whereupon Jack related the glorious charge to Rafael, and thereby stirred up the excitable Spaniard to fiery enthusiasm.

“Oh, what men are the English,” he cried, stamping his foot. “It is a story worthy of the Cid. But this to-morrow, my friend—it is rare! it is brave! and, like your story, there is no good to be gained.”

“Perhaps Gomez wants to frighten the rebels by showing them how dauntless are his men.”

“Dios! That is not wise. The sinking of *The Pizarro* will frighten them without risking two hundred lives. However, as it is ordered, it must be done. But you, Don Juan! Will you go?”

“Assuredly, mi amigo. I wish to see the Señor Correspondent and Felipe.”

“But you will be killed.”

“That is as it may be. But no, Rafael. I did not escape the perils of Totatzine to fall in a skirmish before the walls of Janjalla. But see, mi amigo, it is nearly dawn, let us snatch a few hours’ sleep.”

“Bueno!” replied Rafael, leading the way to his cabin; “but first we must call our friends together, and toast our victory once more.”

It was done accordingly.

Chapter XXV

Without The Walls

Walls of stone like mountains rise,
Grey against the morning skies;
Still the royal banner flies,
Watched with hate by rebels’ eyes.
And around the ramparts grey,
In the mists an army lies.

Set in battle's wild array,
At the dawning of the day,
Traitors to their sovereign they,
Who would loyal subjects slay.
Hold this city as a slave,
Under democratic sway.

Cannons thunder, banners wave,
As come on the foemen brave,
'Neath these walls to find a grave;
Yet this city shall we save,
Never let it be the prize
Of the coward, fool, and knave.

Shortly after dawn, Jack went on deck, to have a thorough examination of the coast-line. The situation of Janjalla was peculiar. To the right a shallow river meandered seaward through low-lying, swampy ground, discharging itself sluggishly by several mouths. A desolate plain stretched for leagues on the left to the base of distant mountains, and between swamp and plain the city appeared built on a rocky height. Directly in front of the walls the sandy ground fell rapidly towards the sea, on the extreme verge of which was a compact mass of huts forming a kind of sea-port. The wharf shot out suddenly from this miniature town. It lay along the hollow of the beach, and above it, in the near distance, rose the grey walls of Janjalla from the rocky cliffs. Above these, the domes of churches, the towers of houses, and, highest of all, the expanse of bluish sky grey with the chill mists of morning.

In the beach hollow, the army of Xuarez was encamped, partly in the houses, partly in the tents which whitely dotted the desolate shore. Owing to the rapid fall of the ground from the ramparts, the invaders were quite safe from the cannon of the forts. These could defend the town against the attack of ships, but were unable to be depressed sufficiently to command the spot where the rebels were encamped, thus, in the very jaws of danger, lay the besiegers in comparative safety. Jack, surveying all this through a telescope, was astonished to see that the engineers who had constructed the defences had been so foolish as to leave this debatable ground between rampart and sea. Perhaps they deemed that the cannon would not permit ships to approach near enough for the disembarking of hostile troops, but they seemed to have forgotten that the heavy guns of a man-of-war could silence the forts. This, perhaps, had not been done, as the cannon on the ramparts still defended the city; but there was no doubt in Jack's mind that Don Hypolito had landed his troops under cover of a heavy fire from his three ships directed at the forts. Once encamped on shore, and the besiegers could bid defiance to the lines of cannon, whose balls passed harmlessly over their heads.

"Ola, Señor Juan," said Rafael's gay voice behind him, "you are up early."

"Good morning, mi amigo," replied Jack, turning with a smile. "I have been up at least half an hour, examining the town."

"A place forsaken of God, is it not? Dios! to think that some fools would have this to be the capital of Cholocaca. Swamps there, sandy plains yonder. Holy Mary! how can it compare with Tlatonac?"

"It is the first time I have been so far south, and I don't think much of either country or town."

"Oh, the situation is good for defence."

"I'm not so sure of that, Rafael. It is true that the city is built on a rocky height, and well defended by swamp and desert; but look how safely enemies can lie under the walls."

“Eh! what would you, Juan? The muzzles of the guns cannot be depressed sufficiently to sweep the beach.”

“Then why didn’t the engineers build two forts right and left, in order to command the intervening ground?”

“Dios! And thus knock each other to pieces.”

“True. Well, then, have one fort. See, mi amigo. On the right, that wide swamp is a sufficient protection against the approach of an enemy; but had I constructed the defences of the town, I would have run an arm of forts between the desert and that sea-fort. Thus a double line of cannon would have commanded the beach, and even if an enemy did succeed in landing in face of the fire of the town forts, they could not have encamped there as they have done.”

“That is true, Juan,” replied Rafael, who now had the telescope to his eye. “But it is now too late to deplore the lack of defences. The rebels have landed, and are safely bestowed within stone-throw of the city. Look at the number of them, and all on the alert. Santissima! they won’t feel very happy this morning, now that they see *The Pizarro* is lost.”

“Surely,” said Jack, taking no notice of this last remark, “surely Pedraza does not intend to land two hundred men directly in front of the town?”

“It is foolish, I admit,” answered Rafael, shrugging his shoulders; “but what with a sally of our troops from the town, and the guns of our boats playing on the beach, it may be managed.”

“I doubt it. Two hundred men may land under cover of our fire; but, believe me, Rafael, fifty will not break through that living barrier and enter the town.”

“I grant that. As I said last night, it is a useless waste of life, and his Excellency must have surely forgotten the situation of Janjalla when he gave such a rash command. But what else can be done, save obey his order?”

“Obey it, by all means, but not in the way commanded.”

“What do you mean?”

Jack was sweeping the shore right and left with the telescope, and did not reply for a few minutes. At length he spoke, indicating the several points he mentioned, with his hand.

“Behold, mi amigo,” he said, pointing towards the desert, “to land there would be foolish, as the enemy could march along to defend that point while the boats pulled in. The same with the central position. It is madness to land in the teeth of two thousand men. But look to the right. Why not land the troops up the coast, and let the swamp lie between them and the enemy?”

“Bueno!” replied Rafael, seizing the idea at once. “But how do you propose to enter the city?”

“Ah, that I can’t say, not knowing the geography of the place.”

“I have a map below. Come with me, Juan, and we will invent some plan, then go on board *The Iturbide* to interview Pedraza. I am with you in trying to prevent this sacrifice of two hundred men by landing them in the jaws of danger.”

They went down to the cabin, and Rafael, after hunting about for a few minutes, found a map of the southern portion of Cholocaca. He spread it out on the table, and they began to examine it at once.

“Here!” said Jack, drawing his finger along the paper; “here is Janjalla, here the swamp and river, beyond is a kind of rolling prairie. If we land the troops here, we can march them parallel to the river, into the interior country.”

“That is so, mi amigo! But, you see, the river is ever between the troops and the city. If the enemy see our men marching on this side, they can march on the other, and so keep our men from entering the city.”

“Not if Pedraza signals to the forts. You forget that the rebels are only safe so long as they keep in the hollow of the beach. If they march up on the right, they expose themselves to a heavy fire. Consequently, the forts can keep them in check, and our troops, marching along on the right bank of the stream, can surely find some ford by which to cross, and then gain the inland gate of Janjalla by a detour.”

“Como, no!” exclaimed Rafael, in a lively tone rolling up the map. “It is not at all a bad idea. Let us board *The Iturbide*, and explain your plan to the Comandante.”

“Who commands the expedition?” asked Jack, as he hastily snatched up a brace of revolvers and a heavy cloak.

“Don Sebastian de Ahumada. He is a great friend of mine. In fact,” added Rafael, laughing, “he is a cousin of Doña Carmencita de Tajada.”

“My poor Rafael, your suit does not progress much in that quarter.”

“Not with Don José, perhaps; but I am content to wait till the war is ended, so far as my angel is concerned. She will be true to me, as I to her. By the way, mi amigo, know you that Don José is now Governor of Acauhtzin, in the absence of Don Hypolito?”

“No, I did not know it. Is Don Hypolito yonder?”

“Not now. He was on board *The Cortes*, and has gone back to Acauhtzin, but will doubtless come south again, to personally conduct the war.”

“I should like to get a shot at him,” said Jack, grimly; “the brute. I shall never forgive him for his treachery. Well, who knows?—

Perhaps a recruit
May chance to shoot
Great General Bonaparte.”

“What say you?” asked Rafael, puzzled at those lines, which were recited in English.

“Nothing, nothing. A something to relieve my feelings. Is that boat never going to be ready?”

“It is ready now,” said the young man, gaily; “in with you, mi amigo! Row to *The Iturbide* Benito! So—give way, men!”

The oars dipped into the water as the sun arose in the east, and the boat shot away from *The Montezuma* over a flood of gold. Rafael was in great spirits, and chatted gaily all the time; but Jack, thinking of the peril of the proposed expedition, was graver. Besides, he was anxious about the safety of Philip and Tim.

“By the way,” said Rafael, suddenly, “Don Pedro did not return with us last night.”

“No; Pedraza asked him to sleep on board *The Iturbide*. See, there he is, looking over the bulwarks. I can tell him by the flash of the sun on his spectacles!”

“Dios! How strange! Will Don Pedro go with you into the town?”

“Certainly not,” replied Jack, decisively; “it is too risky! Take him back with you to Tlatonac.”

“Assuredly! My aunt would never forgive me if harm came to Don Pedro.”

Rafael laughed heartily at the idea, for this undutiful nephew was much amused at the flirtation between Peter and Serafina.

“She will marry him, Juan! I am sure of it.”

“Then we will have four weddings when the war is over, Rafael.”

“Four weddings. Por todos santos! What mean you?”

“Myself and Dolores. Yourself and Doña Carmencita. Pedro and your aunt, and Señor Felipe and Doña Eulalia!”

“Eh, mi amigo!” cried Rafael, in a lively tone, “does my sister favour that cavalier? Dios! what says my father?”

“He does not know anything yet. But as he has consented to receive one heretic into his family, he can surely stretch a point, and receive two.”

“Como, no! But it may be! Who knows? Ah! Here we are at *The Iturbide*. Come, Juan!”

They climbed up the side of the cruiser, and were received by Captain Pedraza and Peter.

“Buenos dias de Dios á ustedes, Señores,” said Pedraza, greeting them heartily. “I am glad to see you both, as I wish to land these troops at once. Señor Pedro desires to go also.”

“What nonsense, Peter,” said Jack, in English, turning to his friend; “it is too dangerous. You stay on board, and go back to Tlatonac.”

“I shall not!” returned the doctor, indignantly; “you are going, so why should not I? Besides, I wish to see Tim, and to be certain that Philip has arrived safely.”

“I don’t want you killed, Peter,” protested Jack.

“I won’t be killed any more than you will be, Jack. It’s not a bit of use your talking, I’m going with you. I have my medicine-chest with me.”

“Oh, well, obstinacy! Have it your own way,” replied Duval, touched by this proof of Peter’s friendship; “but Tim will pitch at me for bringing you into danger.”

“Tim will be glad enough to have a doctor at hand. Why, Jack, I should have been at Totatzine to cure you.”

“Cocom was good at a pinch.”

“A quack!” muttered Peter, scornfully. He could not forgive Cocom having cured Jack so rapidly. It was a case of professional jealousy.

“Señor Duval,” said Pedraza, approaching Jack, “Don Rafael tells me you and he have hit on a plan to land the troops without danger.”

Jack signified that they had some such idea in their heads, and in company with Pedraza, they went below to look at the map. Don Sebastian followed them, and after a long discussion, the Comandante decided to accept the suggestion. *The Iturbide* raised her anchor, and steamed a short distance up the coast, so as to land the troops beyond the swamp. Signals having been made to the torpederas, they remained in their former position, before the town.

When the rebels saw *The Iturbide* moving northward, they shouted with joy, thinking that she was about to leave the harbour; but their delight was turned into rage as they saw boat after boat drop from her sides, and, laden with troops, make for the shore. Numbers ran along the beach, to the verge of the swamp, but here their progress was stayed, as it was impossible for them to cross the quagmire. They could only remain quiet, and gesticulate with anger, though many fired their guns, and two cannon were brought along the shore in the hope of doing some damage.

As yet they were safe, from the forts being too much in the hollow; but when Pedraza saw the cannon brought up, he opened fire with his Armstrongs, and signalled to the torpederas. These steamed abreast of the swamp at once, and did considerable damage with their rapid-firing Hotchkiss guns. Under cover of this cannonade, the whole of the troops were duly landed, in admirable order, with the utmost celerity, and then Jack, Peter, and Don Sebastian prepared to go on shore. Pedraza gave De Ahumada sealed orders for Ggedo from the President, and Rafael occupied himself in saying farewell to his English friends.

“You have your revolvers, mis amigos?” he said anxiously; “and swords? Good! Cloaks? Ah, that is well. Have, also, these flasks of aguardiente; you will need sustenance. The march to the inland-gate may be a long one. Adios.”

“Adios,” replied Jack, dropping over the side. “Give my love to Dolores, when you return to Tlatonac.”

“I shall not fail. And, Don Pedro, have you any message?”

“Si, Señor,” replied Peter, in his hesitating Spanish. “Doña Dolores. Escarabajos.”

“Beetles!” echoed Rafael, in great astonishment. “What does he mean by beetles?”

His curiosity was not gratified, for already the boat was making rapidly for the shore, and Jack, standing up in the stern, was waving his adieux to all on board.

By this time the sun was far above the horizon, and already the heat was becoming unpleasantly great. Don Sebastian at once formed his men into marching order, and the little company proceeded along the bank of the river, towards the interior of the country. Before them spread a kind of rolling downs, with undulating hills, sparsely covered with vegetation. Here and there patches of yellow sand streaked with fine white dust. On one side stretched the illimitable plains, and on the other the ground marshy and treacherous, sank imperceptibly into the bed of the slow-flowing river. Beyond this, an interval of firm

land for some considerable distance, and then the rocky shelf on which Janjalla was built. In front the stream meandered in an erratic manner inland; away in the extreme distance appeared the dim line of forest, above which arose the snowy cone of Xicotencatl. Over all arched the cloudless blue sky, with the sun flaming hotly in the east.

The rebels had been considerably cut up by the incessant firing of the ships, and had wisely fallen back into their camp. When, however, they saw the loyalists moving inland, along the bank of the stream, a troop of cavalry, some hundreds strong, galloped towards the swamp to intercept them, if possible. The cruiser and the torpederas were still in their former position, and as the cavalry turned the fatal corner, to make for the inner country, they opened a heavy cannonade. Considerable damage was inflicted particularly by the Hotchkiss guns, and numbers of riders were soon struggling on the ground with their wounded horses. In a few minutes, however, the troop, nothing dismayed, escaped beyond the line of fire, and galloped parallel with the loyalists, between swamp and walls.

This defile proved to be a perfect death-trap. For those within the town, having observed the landing of the reinforcements, and the chase by the enemy, opened fire from the forts, and shattered the compact mass of horses and men as they steadily galloped along. At length, however, they had to cease their fire, as the rebels artfully kept abreast of the loyalists, and at times the balls swept across the swamp, and played havoc with the soldiers of Don Sebastian. The only thing to be done, therefore, was to let the cavalry go free, and trust to a hand-to-hand combat when on the sandy plains at the back of the town.

Both the ships and the forts, however, were determined that no more of the enemy should join in the pursuit, for a heavy cannonade was kept up as another troop tried to follow, and effectually held them back.

“Bueno!” said Don Sebastian, when he saw this. “We have but to deal with those abreast of us; no more can follow.”

“Cavalry against infantry, mi amigo! It is unequal, particularly if we try to cross the river.”

“Perhaps those in the town will come to our assistance,” suggested Peter, who was trudging along manfully.

“It is probable,” replied De Ahumada, when this remark was translated into good Spanish by Jack. “See, we are now nearly at the end of the town. Yonder is the land-gate. If we remain here, assistance may come, and while the cavalry are defending themselves against our friends, we may be able to cross the river.”

“Yes; that is if the cavalry don’t get reinforced by their own men coming round the other side of the town.”

“Dios!” exclaimed Don Sebastian, grimly, “reinforcements certainly can come that way, but they will be forced to make a wide detour in order to keep out of range of the fort-guns. By the time they come up we may be inside the walls.”

“I fervently trust so, Señor,” replied Duval, who, though no coward, did not relish the idea of engaging two hundred infantry with double the number of cavalry.

The city was enclosed by walls of a considerable height, was shaped in a triangular fashion, the base being towards the ocean, and the land-gate at the acute angle inland. They had now walked some distance past the gate on the other side of the river, and a wide sheet of water rolled between them and their enemies. On all sides spread the sandy plain, and the walls of the city rose suddenly from the flat surface in a most

unexpected fashion. On the left bank halted the cavalry of the enemy, prepared to dispute their crossing, and Don Sebastian was sorely puzzled as to what was the best course to pursue.

“It is madness to cross in the face of that, Don Juan.”

“Well, if we don’t cross at once they will be reinforced from the other side, and then it will be worse.”

“Look, Jack, look!” cried Peter at this moment, “the gates are open!”

Just as he spoke a body of cavalry debouched from the city, and came rapidly towards the rebels. They at once turned to meet this new danger, and thus their attention was drawn off the infantry, upon seeing which Don Sebastian waited a few minutes until the opposing forces clashed together, and then gave the order to cross the river.

“Must we strip?” asked Peter, ruefully, looking at the three hundred yards of water before him.

“Strip! no, man!” said Jack, laughing, “unless you want to enter Janjalla naked. You can swim. At least you could at Bedford.”

“Of course I can swim,” said Peter, testily; “but I hate getting my clothes wet.”

“Oh, hang your clothes! The river is slow-flowing, so it is easy to get across. See! the advance files are in already. In with you!”

Peter did not need any second admonition, but waded into the water beside Jack and Don Sebastian. The cavalry, which otherwise would have shot them down as they swam across, were fully occupied with the loyalist regiment from Janjalla. Already in the extreme distance dark masses might be seen rapidly moving along. They were the reinforcements for the rebels making a detour on the other side of the city. There was not a moment to be lost.

In a remarkably short space of time the whole of the infantry had crossed, and were now standing high and dry on the other bank. Not even giving them time to shake the water from their clothes, Don Sebastian made them kneel and open fire on the rebels in the rear. Fortunately each man had piled his musket and ammunition on his head while swimming, so their arms were in excellent condition, and their cartridges unwetted. A fusillade burst from the line, and wrought considerable damage in the ranks of the enemy. Taken thus between two fires, the rebels found themselves in exceedingly hot water, but trusting that their comrades would soon reach them, turned and tried to ride down the infantry. The soldiers immediately sprung to their feet and scattered widely, firing into the troop whenever they got a chance.

Fresh troops of loyalist cavalry poured out of the gates and made for the scene of action. What with being pretty nearly equally matched with the cavalry, and exposed to the galling fire of the infantry, the rebels began to lose heart, and, breaking into disorderly masses, spread over the plain. The gates of the city were distant a quarter of a mile, and seeing that the reinforcements of the enemy were close at hand, Don Sebastian shouted to his men to close up and make for the shelter of the walls. Seeing this the rebel reinforcements, darting between the moving loyalists and the gates, tried to cut them off, but were met in their turn by the mounted troops from Janjalla. The plain was strewn with dead and dying, and the incessant cracking of rifles, the yells of the combatants, and the thick clouds of pungent smoke added to the horrors of the skirmish.

A huge trooper rode straight at Peter, and rolled him in the dust, but Jack being close at hand shot the horse with his revolver, and pulled his friend out of harm’s way. By this time they were near the gates,

and Peter being somewhat stunned by his knock-down, was dragged along rapidly by Jack, who wanted to get him into shelter as speedily as possible.

It was now dangerous for the infantry to fire, as friend and foe were blended in an inextricable mass; so, forming line as speedily as possible, they ran for the gate, and at length reached it in safety. Seeing that they were now out of danger, the cavalry of Janjalla began to retreat towards the portal. To the left of the town, great masses of reinforcements were moving up, and it would have been madness to have opposed them with the small force of loyalists outside. The cavalry galloped back, and as by this time the infantry had fled inside the walls, the gates were closed at once.

“Jack! Jack! Peter!” cried a well-known voice, as Tim, grimy with gunpowder and smoke, plunged down the street towards the gate. “Are you safe?”

“Quite safe. But why the deuce are these men coming back? Why don’t they pour out and exterminate those devils?”

“What!” yelled Tim, throwing up his arms in surprise. “Why they can’t be spared. There’s but seven hundred men here!”

“Seven hundred!” cried Jack, seized with a sudden qualm of fear. “But the reinforcements—the thousand men?”

“No reinforcements have arrived, Jack.”

“And Philip?”

“Philip!” said Tim, in alarm. “Was he with the reinforcements? God be gracious to me. Not a man has arrived. When did they leave Tlatonac?”

“Four days ago.”

“Four days! One hundred miles!”

The three friends, amid the tumult around them, with the enemy thundering at the gate, looked at one another in silent dread. Then Jack took off his sombrero.

“Poor Philip!” he said, solemnly. “I was afraid of those Indians. Oh, my poor friend!”

Chapter XXVI

Within The Walls

Circle of stone,
Circle of steel,
Loyalists true,
Pent up in battle belts twain;
Yet we, alone,
Doubly feel,
That with our few,
We shall a victory gain.

Climb up our foes,
Over the wall,
Deep bit the swords,
Fiercely the cannon spout fire;
Yet 'neath our blows,
Downward they fall,
Traitorous hordes,
In torment and blood to expire.

Tim at once took his friends to his quarters, and made them comfortable, but scarcely had they finished a hurried meal, when an aide-de-camp arrived from General Gigedo requiring their presence without delay. As Peter had received a nasty blow on the head during the *mêlée*, Jack insisted that he should remain behind and rest himself. Peter feebly remonstrated against this arrangement, as he wanted to accompany his friends, but in the end was forced to yield to their insistence. Then Duval buckled on his sword, slipped his revolvers into his belt, and went off with Tim to report himself at head-quarters.

Both of them were terribly alarmed about Philip. In the first burst of emotion Jack had deemed his friend dead; but, on looking at the matter calmly, it seemed probable that he would yet turn up well and unhurt. It was impossible that Indians, in whatever number, could utterly exterminate a body of disciplined troops amounting to a thousand men. Tim's opinion was that if they had been attacked and overpowered by strategy, they had fled to the nearest town for shelter. As he had marched overland with Colonel Garibay from Tlatonac, he knew the country better than did Jack, and proceeded to defend his theory of the reinforcements' safety, by describing the position of the towns.

"It's a hundred miles or more as the crow flies from Tlatonac to this God-forsaken place. Within that limit are four towns, no less—one every twenty miles. When we marched south two weeks ago, we first went to Chichimec, then to Puebla de los Naranjos, which last one is midway. Hermanita is next, and then after dropping in at Centeotl, we came on to Janjalla!"

"Still, if the Indians surprised them by night they might have surrounded and exterminated the whole lot. To my mind nothing is so dangerous as a despised enemy."

"What!" cried Tim, with great contempt, "d'you mean to tell me that a lot of naked savages could manage that. By my soul, 'tis impossible!"

"But, my dear fellow, the Indians are out in thousands. Cocom told me so."

"They may be out in millions," retorted Tim, emphatically. "I tell you, Jack, they couldn't have killed all these men. A good number of them must have escaped to the nearest town, and, I'll lay my soul on it, that among those who got away is Philip. He wasn't born to be murdered by a lot of howling savages."

"Well, let us hope so," replied Jack, who was beginning to take this comfortable view of things himself; "but, tell me, Tim, when the reinforcements didn't arrive, why did you not wire to Tlatonac?"

"Begad! I couldn't. The rebels cut the telegraph wires some days since. The last message was that you and Doña Dolores had come back safely. Ah, my boy," cried Tim, slapping Jack on the shoulder, "didn't I sing 'Glory Hallelujah,' when I heard that same. But, I knew you'd turn up again all safe."

"I didn't know it myself!" replied Jack, grimly "it was touch and go, I can tell you."

"Dioul! You must tell me all about it. But hold your noise, Jack, and don't be lamenting for Philip. If you returned, so will he."

"I fervently hope so," said Jack, gloomily; "but I own that I feel doubtful. Are the wires cut on both sides of the town?"

"No! glory be to the saints. I can still telegraph to England by the wires going south, but I expect them to be cut every minute, so I'm hard at work sending all the news I can."

"Did you see the fight last night?"

"Did I not! Whow, my boy! I guessed what was up, but till the dawn we weren't quite sure of the trouble. Begad! *The Pizarro's* gone anyhow."

"Yes. But the other warships and transports are due to-night."

"Then we'll have another fight," said Tim, coolly; "wasn't I wishing I was on board a torpedera! There's a heap to talk about, Jack; how you escaped from that infernal Xuarez, and how you sank *The Pizarro*. I want to wire about that same right away."

"First I must see what the General desires. Oh, here is Garibay. A thousand greetings, Colonel."

"What, Señor Juan! Ah, mi amigo, how pleased I am to see you safe once more. I deemed you were dead."

"Dios! He is a merry corpse, Señor," said Tim, turning his head. "Where's the General?"

"Within yonder house of the Jefe Politico. You also, Señor Correspoñsal, does he desire to see?"

"I am at the service of Señor Gigedo. Know you, Comandante, what he desires to speak of?"

"It is that you will convey the glorious news of our naval victory to your gran'diario."

"Dios! That will be done within an hour. I but waited to find out all particulars from Don Juan."

"Oh! I can tell you everything," said Jack cheerfully, "I was on board *The Montezuma* with Don Rafael, and it was her torpedo which sank *The Pizarro*."

"Viva los Torpederas," shouted Garibay, who was greatly excited over this unexpected victory.

The cry was taken up by a chattering group of officers lounging in from off the General's headquarters, and Jack being recognized was at once surrounded by them. They were mostly young fellows, who were weary of being pent up within the walls of a suburban town, and saw in this sinking of *The Pizarro*, a chance of coming face to face with the enemy. It was all cries of Viva! Bueno! Gracias a Dios! as Duval passed through their midst, and many would fain have detained him, to learn particulars of the combat; but Jack was anxious to hear Gigedo's views concerning the non-arrival of the reinforcements, so entered the mansion at once. Colonel Garibay conducted them both without delay to the General's apartments. Gigedo, cigarette in mouth, was poring over a large map of the country, evidently tracing the line of march from Tlatonac, but on seeing Duval, he sprang up and advanced to salute him, with a pleased smile.

"A thousand congratulations, Señor, on your escape from the hands of Xuarez," he said, warmly; "and still more on your gallant conduct of last night."

"Oh! as to that, General, I was but an onlooker," replied Duval, modestly. "The credit of sinking *The Pizarro* rests with Don Rafael Maraquando. Have you heard the particulars?"

“Assuredly Señor, Don Sebastian de Ahumada has left me but this moment. He informed me of the affair, and also delivered the instructions from His Excellency. I find here,” added Gigedo, striking a pile of papers with his open hand, “that over a thousand men left Tlatonac for the front, four days ago.”

“That is so, General. My friend, Señor Felipe, was with them.”

“They have not arrived, Don Juan. The troops of Xuarez cannot have intercepted them and I am at a loss to understand this delay. Can you explain?”

“Señor,” said Jack after a pause, “before I left Tlatonac there were rumours of an Indian rising. While a prisoner at Totatzine I saw myself the tribes, incited to war by Ixtlilxochitli, the High Priest of the Chalchuih Tlatonac.”

“Ah, that cursed opal!” cried Garibay, fiercely; “it is the cause of great trouble. Would that it could be taken from the Indians.”

“Rest content, Señor Garibay; it *is* taken from the Indians. Doña Dolores took it from the shrine, and it is now in Tlatonac.”

“Dios!” exclaimed the General and Garibay, simultaneously, while Tim was scarcely less astonished.

“Naturally enough the Indians wish to recover this sacred gem, Señor, therefore the rising has taken place sooner than was expected. I fear, gentlemen, that the Indians have surprised and massacred our poor friends.”

“Santissima Madre! a thousand men?”

“The Indian forces amount to three times that number,” said Jack, quickly. “It is true that His Excellency, at my request, sent messengers after the reinforcements to warn them of a possible attack. Yet it is not unlikely that these messengers may have been intercepted by the Indians. They might have fallen on the reinforcements without warning, and then—Señor, three thousand against one thousand—an unexpected attack. Alas! it is a terrible risk.”

“Our troops may have retreated to one of the towns,” said Gigedo, taking the same view of the case as had Tim. “This I would know if the telegraph wires had not been cut. But as it is we can but wait.”

“And meantime,” remarked Garibay, dryly “Xuarez will land some troops—already two thousand lie before the town—we have hard work, even behind our walls to keep them back. Now we have scarcely five hundred here capable of defending the town. Many are dead and wounded—fever and dysentery prevail greatly. If Xuarez lands more troops and makes an immediate attack Janjalla must fall.”

“He cannot land more troops while *The Iturbide* and the torpederas guard the harbour.” said Gigedo in a tone of some displeasure; “and even if these two thousand again assault the walls we can hold out until reinforcements arrive. His Excellency tells me that two thousand men are to follow in ten days.”

“Hark!” cried Tim, as Garibay was about to reply; “a gun!—another. Señores, the warships are at it again. With your permission, General.”

He hastily left the room and went off to the walls where he was soon afterwards joined by Jack, who had been hurriedly dismissed by the General. They looked seaward, and saw the performance of a most extraordinary drama.

It was now about three o'clock, and the ocean like a sheet of glass stretched in an inclined plane upward to the distant horizon. Owing to the elevation of the city walls they looked down, as from the heights of an amphitheatre. The ramparts were crowded with spectators, townsfolk and soldiers. Immediately below was the beach, the rebel camp—then the long pier shooting out into the blue, and beyond the flashing expanse of the sea. *The Iturbide* was lying a quarter of a mile from the shore with her two torpederas, one on each side of her. The cruiser had swung round, and was firing her guns at a slowly approaching warship.

"*The Columbus!*" cried Jack, when his eyes fell upon this vessel.

"True for you, John," said Tim, handing him the glass. "She has come south by herself. I thought you told me the transports were not due here till midnight."

"No more they are. I expect Xuarez, learning through his spies of our departure from Tlatonac has sent *The Columbus* on ahead to join forces with *The Pizarro*. With two warships he hopes to keep our lot at bay till the transports with the *Cortes* are safe in the harbour."

"The sinking of *The Pizarro* will rather upset his plans. *The Columbus* dare not attack two torpederas and a cruiser, single-handed."

"Upon my soul! that seems exactly what she intends to do, Tim."

A low murmur of surprise arose from the crowd on the ramparts, who were eagerly watching the warships. It seemed as though *The Columbus* was bent on her own destruction, for she came steaming straight ahead for the three ships of the Junta, insolently flying the red flag of Xuarez.

"What the deuce does she mean," cried Tim, in perplexity. "Surely she can't mistake *The Iturbide* for her consort."

"Perhaps she intends to desert," suggested Jack.

The Columbus was now more within range, and though hitherto she had been silent under the fire of *The Iturbide*, she now began to speak in her turn, and a white line of smoke ran along her black sides as the balls came singing over the water.

"Not much deserting about that," said Tim, grimly; "no! the rebels have some scheme in their heads."

By this time Pedraza was thoroughly enraged at the insolence of this one ship attacking him single-handed, and signalled at once to the torpederas. The captain of *The Columbus* saw that the signals ordered the boats to "up anchor," and acted accordingly. In a surprisingly short space of time the rebel ship had swung round, and with full steam ahead was standing out to sea. The ships of the Junta were taken by surprise at their manœuvre, and it was fully a question of an hour before they started in pursuit. Tim shut his glass with a click.

"Jack, I see it all. *The Columbus* wants to get our boats out of the harbour so as to let *The Cortes* and the transports slip in together."

"Rather a risky game, Tim. She'll be overhauled and sunk by the torpederas in no time."

"Not while she can keep them off with her heavy guns! What speed have the torpederas?"

"Eighteen to nineteen knots."

“And *The Columbus*?”

“Well, Rafael says her ordinary speed is fifteen but in case of need she can crack up steam to eighteen.”

“Even that gives the torpederas one knot to the good. But she can outsteam *The Iturbide*.”

“Oh yes; sixteen is *her* limit!”

“Then I tell you what! *The Columbus*, as I said, has come here as a decoy—she knows the cruiser can’t touch her speed, and she hopes to keep the torpederas at a safe distance with her heavy guns. She’s off in a bee line straight out, and the other boats are after her. Then she’ll dodge them and steam back here to find *The Cortes* and the transports all safe in harbour.”

“I believe you are right, Tim.”

“Of course I’m right. Look at the way she’s smoking through the water.”

Jack put the glass to his eyes and saw *The Columbus* was travelling at top speed towards the open sea. After her scampered the two torpedo boats like hounds on her trail. Further behind *The Iturbide* with the black smoke vomiting from her funnels was putting her soul into the chase. Pedraza was evidently determined to follow up one victory by another, and over eager to sink or capture the crack ironclad of the rebels, forgot all about the incoming transports. Thus, in half an hour the four ships were mere specks on the horizon, and the harbour of Janjalla was left open for the arrival of Xuarez and fresh troops.

The crowd of people on the ramparts were too excited at the stirring spectacle of the chase to think of such a thing, and yelled themselves hoarse in cheering for Pedraza. Below on the beach the rebels, who had evidently understood the manœuvres of *The Columbus*, were cheering vigorously for Don Hypolito.

“Wait you dogs,” cried Jack, shaking his fists at them; “soon shall you sing another tune.”

“By all the saints so shall we,” said Tim, wisely: “unless the forts keep off the transports we’ll have another two thousand troops down there this night, and then—it’s wigs on the green there will be.”

“I agree with you, Tim—unless the reinforcements arrive.”

“Even then, four thousand attacking a town can do a powerful lot, and when the reinforcements arrive we’ll only have one thousand five hundred to put against them. However, let us not despair,” added Tim, philosophically. “Come with me, Don Juan, and we’ll look over the town. Then we’ll go and see if there is any sign of the new troops.”

Jack assented, and descending from the ramparts they made their way through the town to the house where Tim had his quarters. The streets were filled with soldiers, who mostly looked smart, and well fitted for their work. Here and there were wounded men, and a few sick with malarian fever from the adjacent swamp, but on the whole it was wonderful how healthy was the town. Twice had the rebels assaulted the walls and twice been beaten back, not without considerable loss of men on the side of the loyalists. Fortunately, provisions were plentiful, and it was the cool season, therefore the troops of the Junta were in comparatively good condition. Despite their small numbers, they were so heartened by the sinking of *The Pizarro*, that it was plain they would fight like fiends to hold Janjalla until aid arrived from the capital.

The townspeople took the fact of being besieged in the most contented manner, and hardly interrupted their daily occupations. In the streets the tortilleras were crying their wares, the water-carriers proclaiming the fact that they sold “aqua limpia,” and, but for the unusual number of soldiers, it would have been quite

impossible to see that the city was in the very jaws of danger. At times a woman wrapped in the rebozo would pass along the street, but as a rule they kept within doors, and showed themselves but rarely. In the plazas men were being drilled, and many of the houses were used as hospitals for the sick and wounded.

Tim and Jack made their way through the crowded streets, and duly arrived at the former's quarters, where they found Peter eagerly expecting them. He was weary of being by himself, and when he heard they were going to the land-gate to seek news of the reinforcements, insisted on accompanying them. After taking a drink of aguardiente, of which they stood much in need, owing to the exhaustion caused by excitement, the three friends set off at once to see if they could hear anything about the expected troops.

Don Sebastian was fraternising with the captain in command of the cavalry, as his own troops had been sent forward to the sea ramparts. The mounted regiments were stationed at this end of the town as they were more useful in sallies than were the infantry. This was proved by the way in which they had succoured the soldiers from *The Iturbide*, as only horse-men could have kept the rebel troops at bay.

"No signs yet, Señor," said Don Sebastian, politely; "but half an hour ago the general sent out two Indian scouts with instructions to inquire at Centeotl for our men."

"That is twenty miles away."

"Yes; but these Indians travel fast. Before midnight we shall hear news of our troops—that is if they get as far south as Centeotl."

"And before midnight Xuarez will have landed his new regiments," said Tim, turning away. "Well, there's no help for it, I suppose. Come, Jack and Peter, 'tis no use waiting here. We must wait till these scouts return."

"And meanwhile, Tim?"

"Come with me to the telegraph-office. I'm going to send an account of the sea-fight to my paper."

"You are sure the wires are not cut to the southward?" said Peter, as they trudged along to the office.

"They weren't this morning anyhow. Why should they cut them? All they want to do is to intercept communication with the capital. They don't care two straws what goes to England."

"Xuarez does. He told me so."

"Ah! but, you see, Xuarez is not here at present, and has forgotten to give orders to cut them. When he arrives again, he'll do it, maybe."

"Well, seeing that he wishes the world to look on him as a noble patriot, he certainly won't care about your wiring plain truths about him to the old country. He'll either cut the wires or bring a war correspondent on his own hook."

"A rival!" cried Tim, indignantly. "If I thought so, I'd shoulder a musket myself, and go out to shoot the dirty villain. Here's the P.O., my boys! Peter! hold your noise. Jack's going to give me a history of the fight."

"I know as much about it as Jack does," said Peter, in an injured tone, as they entered the office.

“Then I’ll let you put in a word here and there,” replied his friend, in a kind tone. “Why, Peter, I’d do anything to please you. Didn’t I think you were knocked out of time, entirely. Manuel, are the wires right?”

“Yes, Señor,” replied the operator, a dark alert-looking man; “all safe to Truxillo!”

“Bueno! Then they will be safe to England. Truxillo is in Honduras, and is as right as the Bank. Come, Jack, begin at once!”

They were over two hours at this business as, what with Jack’s roundabout descriptions and Peter’s interruptions, it took some time for Tim to get the story ship-shape. Then Manuel was constantly wiring the intelligence, as transmitted to him by Tim, who took full advantage of the licence given by his editor to send extensive telegrams. It was close on six o’clock when he finished, and he was just stretching himself with a yawn after his long spell of sitting, when outside a murmur began. It rapidly swelled into a roar and the three friends rushed out of the office to learn what new event had taken place. The telegraph-office was situated in the street which ran straight to the land-gate, and down this street they saw advancing a dense body of men.

“Vivas los soldados! Viva el Republico!”

“Hurrah!” roared Tim, wildly, “‘tis the reinforcements!”

“There’s Philip!” cried Jack, pushing his way through the crowd.

“And wounded!” said Peter, noticing with a true professional eye that Cassim’s left arm hung useless by his side.

The Janjalla Band, stationed in the Plaza, burst out into the patriotic strains of the “Opal Fandango,” the crowd yelled and cheered, the soldiers tramped steadily down the street; and Tim, to the imminent danger of his life, flung himself almost under the feet of Philip’s horse.

“Philip, my dear boy! Here we are.”

“Tim! Jack! Thank God!” cried Philip, and urging his horse a little way to the side, jumped down from the saddle.

Tim gripped one hand, Jack the other, and Peter patted the baronet on the back. Philip looked worn and haggard, and winced as Tim seized his left hand.

“Are you wounded?” cried Tim, letting it go.

“Yes; but not badly! An Indian arrow through the fleshy part of the arm.”

“Ah!” exclaimed Jack, anxiously, “then Cocom was right. You have been attacked by Indians.”

“Two days ago! They surprised our camp by night, and came in in overwhelming force. Velez was unable to rally his men, and we were forced to retreat to Centeotl.”

“And how many men have you brought, Philip?”

“Six hundred!”

“And one thousand started from Tlatonac,” said Jack, sadly; “four hundred killed. Thank God, Philip, you at least are safe.”

Chapter XXVII

The Fall Of Janjalla

They mount the ramparts, and they man the walls,
Resolved to keep the climbing foe at bay,
The hot-mouthed cannon hurl a thousand balls,
A thousand swords flash forth to wound and slay.
Down in the fosse the planted ladder falls,
And smoke sulphurous spreads its veil of grey;
Like incense from an altar up it rolls,
To tell the war-god that a thousand souls
Are to his honour sacrificed this day.

Oh, Mars! Oh, red Bellona! he or she,
Though fallen your shrines, we bend yet 'neath your yoke;
Born later than the Greeks, we seem to be
Not much more civilised than were those folk,
Instead of spears, and shields, and cutlery,
Revolvers, rifles, guns, spit fire and smoke.
For ye, blood-thirsty pair, we yet retain
Our ancient love, and hence on battle plain
With myriad victims we your names invoke.

The siege of Janjalla lasted five days, and during that period the town was completely invested by the troops of Xuarez. As had been foreseen by him, the *Columbus*, acting as a decoy, had drawn away the ships of the Junta from protecting the harbour, and that same night Xuarez, under cover of darkness, landed four thousand troops from his transports. By an inconceivable oversight on the part of the engineers, the city walls were unprovided with search-lights and electric apparatus, so Don Hypolito was enabled to land boat-load after boat-load of men without hindrance. By dawn six thousand men were encamped on the beach, under the very guns of the forts.

Had Xuarez attacked the capital, he would have been easily repulsed, for in Tlatonac all the latest inventions for defence were to be found. Krupp's guns pointed from the forts, powerful electric lights swept the harbour, and the bed of the ocean in front of the sea-line was one vast mass of torpedoes. The flower of the Cholocacan army were behind the walls, armed with the latest invented rifles, and altogether a siege of the capital would have lasted months. Don Hypolito, however, was too crafty to waste his time so fruitlessly, and artfully attacked the Republic in her weakest part.

Janjalla was but ill defended by walls and cannon and but ill garrisoned with capable men. By throwing on the devoted town an overwhelming mass of troops he could hope to capture it within a few days. Then making it his head-quarters, could gradually advance along the plain towards the capital, eating up a town at every twenty miles. He was already master of Acauhtzin in the north, and if he could only reduce Janjalla and the four inland towns, he would be in complete command of the whole inner country. Then, besieging Tlatonac by land and sea, he could starve the capital into surrender.

Promptness was Xuarez' great characteristic, and so rapidly had he accomplished the transference of active operations from north to south that he had completely taken the Junta by surprise. It was a fatal mistake on the part of the Governmental party in leaving such an incapable man as Gomez at the head of

affairs. If, relying on the strength of the capital to protect herself, he had sent all his available soldiers to garrison Janjalla and defeat the rebels before they could get a footing in the south, he would have probably crushed the rebellion in the bud. Victorious in the lower part of the country, he could have then reduced Acauhtzin at his leisure, and thus ended the war within a few weeks.

Unfortunately, Gomez lost his head at the critical period, and proved himself quite unable to cope with the masterly activity of the rebel leader. First of all, he committed the mistake of not concentrating his troops at Janjalla, and then sent a few hundreds of men down at a time. General Gigedo therefore found himself shut up in Janjalla with scarcely a thousand troops, few guns, and insufficient ammunition. The telegraph-wires having been cut, he was unable to communicate promptly with the capital, and being in urgent need of reinforcements, was in absolute despair as to what would occur in the near future. It was true that Gomez had promised another thousand men in ten days; but, even if they arrived earlier, it would be too late, as with the small garrison at his disposal, it was impossible that he could hold out against a force of six thousand for any lengthened period.

He would have sent messengers to Tlatonac for aid, but the troops of Don Hypolito completely encircled the city, and it was worse than useless to try and break through that girdle of steel. He held a council of war, but no decision could be arrived at, save that Janjalla should hold out, if possible, until reinforcements arrived from the capital. Day after day Gigedo and his staff swept the ocean with their glasses, looking for the torpederas and the cruiser. None of them appeared, and it could only be conjectured that they had captured *The Columbus*, and taken her at once to Tlatonac, in the harbour of which they were now doubtless lying.

Meanwhile, the garrison fought with desperate valour, and with great difficulty managed to keep the rebels at bay, but it could be easily seen that such a state of things could not last. On the fourth day preparations were made by Suarez for a final assault, and everyone instinctively guessed that the end had come. *The Cortes* was lying with the transports out of range of the fort-guns, and, by means of their glasses, those shut up in the town could see that the warship was making ready to bombard the city.

Don Hypolito had come south again, with his new troops, and could be now seen riding about the camp with a brilliant staff, seeing that all things were ready for the assault. Jack, who, in company with Philip, was leaning over the ramparts, noted the audacious rebel, and remarked on his presence before the walls of Janjalla.

"There goes the brain of the rebellion," he said touching Philip on the shoulder. "If he could only be disposed of, the war would be over."

"No doubt. But Suarez knows his own value too well, and will therefore keep out of danger. He has evidently made up his mind to finish the siege to-day."

"Unless help comes, I think he will succeed," replied Jack, gloomily. "I cannot conceive what the President or Maraquando can be thinking about to thus neglect Janjalla. If this town falls into the hands of Suarez, as it must do, unless a miracle takes place, Don Francisco will find the war longer than he expects."

"Gomez is a fool," said Philip, stamping his foot. "What the deuce is the use of keeping all the army in the capital? There must be ten thousand soldiers shut up in Tlatonac, and his Excellency evidently intends to keep them there till Suarez and his victorious troops arrive before the walls."

"Very likely the Indians are before the walls now, and are waiting for Suarez to join them."

“It’s not improbable. Things don’t look promising for the Junta, and all because they let Gomez muddle the business. See, the rebels are marching up to the sea-gate. It is now noon. Before sundown they will be within the walls, and masters of the city.”

“What about the garrison?”

“Their lives depend on the caprice of Xuarez,” said Philip, after a pause. “He may let Gigedo march out with the remains of his troop, or massacre every one of us.”

“I don’t intend to be massacred,” replied Jack, dryly; “and, what is more, I don’t intend to be seen by Xuarez. He must know by this time, through his spies, that I escaped from Totatzine, but he is probably ignorant that I am in Janjalla. I must escape unseen, Philip, else he will send me back to be slaughtered by Ixtlilxochitli.”

“Hardly, Jack, while Tim is at hand!”

“What do you mean?”

“Don Hypolito,” said Philip, sagely, “wishes to stand well with the world. Tim is the medium through which his actions are reported to the world. Were he to send an Englishman to be offered up by savages to a barbaric deity, there would be trouble with England. Xuarez can’t afford to risk that, so he will let you go free.”

“He didn’t do that in Acauhtzin.”

“In Acauhtzin, my friend, you were supposed by us to be killed in the riot. He could do as he pleased with one, who, to the world was practically a non-existing person. Here it is different. You are alive, you are with your friends, one of whom is a correspondent of a great English journal. He dare not seize you for his own ends in broad daylight. No, my dear Jack, while we are beside you, Xuarez will think twice before repeating his treachery of Acauhtzin. He will have to look for a new victim for Ixtlilxochitli.”

“I fervently hope and trust so,” answered Jack, looking at his revolver to see that it was loaded. “And now I suppose we had better go to the Plaza. The troops must be assembling just now. Hark! there goes the trumpet. Where is Tim?”

“In the telegraph-office, with Peter, wiring news to his paper.”

“Poor Peter,” said Duval, as they left the ramparts; “he came here to collect beetles, and finds himself plunged into an unpleasant war.”

“Never mind. There’s nothing like experience, Jack. Peter will recount his deeds of valour, even unto the third generation. We will come out safe in the end. You will marry Dolores, I Eulalia, and all will be gas and gaiters, *videlicet* Nicholas Nickleby.”

Philip’s gaiety was infectious, and Jack burst out laughing at his last remark. They had no time, however, for further conversation, as the trumpets were calling loudly in the Plaza, and they hurried to that portion of the town to find the troops rapidly falling in. General Gigedo made a speech to encourage his soldiers, assuring them that he had communicated with Tlatonac, and that relief would shortly come to the besieged town.

“Is that true, or a lie?” asked Jack of Don Sebastian, who stood beside him.

"True," replied the Spaniard, smiling. "This morning carrier pigeons were sent to his Excellency with messages of our deplorable state. We shall certainly be relieved in a few days."

"A few days!" echoed Philip, with a sneer. "My dear Señor de Ahumada, a few hours will see our troops evacuating Janjalla."

"If we are forced to do that, Señor, we can fall back on Centeotl."

"What, with a few hundred men, and the Indians scouring the country?"

"They are further north."

"I assure you they are not," replied Cassim, emphatically. "We were attacked near Centeotl, and by this time the savages are between that town and this. Señor de Ahumada, I assure you that if we evacuate Janjalla, we shall fall into the hands of the Indians."

"Dios!" cried Don Sebastian, suddenly. "*The Cortes* has started bombarding." Even as he spoke a bomb burst in the air directly over the Plaza. At once Ggedo gave the signal to the troops to march to the ramparts. In the distance they could hear the fierce cries of the rebels as they marched out of camp, and a tremour passed through the whole of the city as those within its walls recognised the desperate state of affairs. Bomb after bomb exploded with deafening noises, the troops manned the walls, the besiegers hurled themselves against the sea-gate and planted ladders against the walls. The assault had commenced. It was the beginning of the end.

The full force at the disposal of General Ggedo, excluding the sick and wounded, amounted to some nine hundred men. He divided this into two portions: five hundred held the sea-facing portion of the town, four hundred were stationed at the inland gate. Xuarez attacked the two gates of the town simultaneously, and trusted, in the event of entering at either portal, to be enabled to attack the loyalists in the rear, and thus crush them between two armies.

On the ramparts it was not so difficult to keep the foe back as it was below. They planted ladders, and these were hurled with their burden of climbing men into the ditch below. An incessant fusillade of musketry crackled along the walls, and the cannon with depressed muzzles hurled their balls with more or less damaging effect into the dense throng massed on the beach below. The bombs from *The Cortes* did their deadly work skilfully, and the besiegers kept themselves as widely apart as possible, so as to neutralise the effect of the shells on compact masses.

It was outside the sea-gate, however, that the siege was pressed most hardly. Xuarez had cannon planted at the gate, to break down, if possible, the huge wooden valves, clamped with iron. Through the loop-holes low down in the walls the besiegers fired incessantly, killing the rebel gunners as they strove to discharge the cannon. Above the city hung a thick cloud of grey smoke, and at intervals, through the misty veil, flared the red flame of a bomb bursting overhead. The rattle of musketry, the booming of cannon, the cries of the wounded, the shouts of besieged and besiegers, all made an infernal din deafening to the ear.

Tim and Peter were at the land-gate in company with Captain Velez and Colonel Garibay, while Jack and Philip fought side by side in repelling the attack from the sea front. After an incessant cannonading lasting two hours, the rebels managed to smash the gates down with their artillery, and rushed in only to find themselves confronted by a dense mass of resolute soldiery.

From the sea-gate the street arose suddenly, and on the top of the incline Ggedo had planted cannon which cut lanes in the throng of rebels pressing through the gate. At last the battle resolved itself into a hand-to-hand fight in which the loyalists strove to beat back the rebel forces from the gate. Xuarez saw

this, and signalled to *The Cortes* to stand in closer and drop her shells into the centre of the besieged. At once the warship did as she was commanded, and in a few moments bombs were creating fearful havoc in the ranks of the loyalists. In answer, the guns of the forts speedily opened fire on the warship, but did little damage, as the besiegers were too busily occupied in repelling the foe as they swarmed up the walls, to take careful aim.

What with the dense crowd pressing from without, the loss of men caused by the incessant bursting of the bombs in their midst, the loyalists began to fall back, and, in spite of the most desperate resistance, were thrust beyond the line of cannon at the top of the street. A horde of rebel soldiery rushed inside the gate, and proceeded to scale the ramparts in order to aid their comrades who were climbing the outer walls, and to silence the guns playing on *The Cortes*.

Skilfully making use of all material he found to hand, Xuarez turned the cannon taken from the loyalists on themselves. In the hurried retreat, they had been unable to spike the guns, and now these, loaded and fired by the rebels, were mowing them down in dozens. The soldiers on the ramparts were either killed or beaten back, and the whole of the sea front of Janjalla was in complete possession of Xuarez. One comfort had the loyalists, namely, that they were protected in the rear by their men defending the land-gate.

Shortly, however, a roar of rage, and the cheers of the besiegers announced that the town was captured on that side. The soldiers retreated towards the Plaza in the centre of the town, and there found their comrades who had fallen back from the sea-gate. Here there was this handful of men shut up in the square, surrounded on all sides by the victorious rebels. They could not possibly hold out long against the dense masses converging to that centre from all parts of the town, and it could be easily seen that the siege was practically over.

During the fighting night had fallen, and now the battle was going on in the dim twilight, rendered still darker by the heavily hanging clouds of smoke enwrapping the town. Jack had received a nasty cut on the shoulder; but Philip was unwounded, and in the general scrimmage they managed to keep well together. When beaten back into the Plaza, they made for the telegraph-office, where they hoped to find Tim and Peter. This was the rendezvous appointed by Tim in case the battle went in favour of the rebels, as he wished to send a final message to his paper before clearing out of the town. With a handful of men, principally those belonging to their own regiment, Philip and Jack managed to throw themselves into the telegraph-office, and shortly afterwards were joined by Tim.

“Where’s Peter?” asked Jack, as he saw the huge form of his friend dashing through the door.

“Just behind, with Don Sebastian,” gasped Tim, throwing himself into a chair. “It’s all up, boys; the *Opposidores* are in full possession of the land-gate.”

“And the sea-gate also,” said Philip, who was reloading his revolver. “All our men are in the Plaza, and can’t hold out much longer. Whew! there’s another bomb.”

“We’d better get out of Janjalla, and make for Centeotl,” cried Don Sebastian, entering with his sword smashed in two; “all is over!”

“Gigedo?”

“Killed! Garibay is wounded, and taken prisoner!”

“Where is Don Pedro?”

“Here I am,” cried Peter, darting into the room and closing the door. “There’s a regiment of rebels cutting their way through the crowd to take the telegraph-office. Xuarez has particularly commanded it.”

“Anyhow, I’ll have time to send another telegram, if I die for it,” said Tim, who was hastily scribbling notes. “Where’s Manuel?”

Manuel had vanished; so Tim, with a growl, sat down to work the instrument himself.

“Keep those devils out, with your men,” he said to Philip, who was barricading the windows with Jack. “I’ll send one telegram, saying Janjalla has fallen, and then we’ll go off.”

“How the devil are we to get away?” asked Philip, angrily.

“Easily. The cavalry barracks are behind here. We’ll get round by the back way and seize the horses, then cut our way out by the land-gate. Once across the river, and we are safe.”

Philip did not wait for the conclusion of this speech, but, with a few men, dashed out at the back of the house to see if the horses were still there. Jack would have followed, but Peter stopped him.

“I have my medicine-chest here. Let me bind up your shoulder.” Jack was unwilling, protesting he did not feel the wound.

“Bosh, my dear boy, you are excited. You will feel it afterwards. If we are to ride to Centeotl, you will need all the blood you have. Don Sebastian can hold the telegraph-office.”

Don Sebastian had posted his men at the windows, and was firing at the mass of rebels, now trying to take the house by storm. All this time Tim was working the instrument and wiring the news of the fall of the city to his editor. Through the yells outside, the rattle of the musketry, and the curses of Don Sebastian could be heard the incessant click, click, click of the telegraph-instrument.

A bomb exploded on the roof of the house, and a few yards of plaster fell from the ceiling. Peter had finished binding up Jack’s wound, and now they were both defending the windows and doors of the mansion.

“How long, Jack?”

“In two minutes the door will be down,” cried Jack. “Do leave that d—d instrument, Tim, and look for Philip.”

“I’ll go!” said Peter, as Tim refused to leave his post. He turned to make for the back way, when Philip came back with a radiant face.

“Here is a dozen horses just outside, all saddled and fresh as daisies! Come, Tim, quick! Jack. De Ahumada.”

“A moment,” said Tim, and went on with his clicking.

Crash! The door was down, and a number of fierce faces appeared at the door. The room was full of smoke, and the rebels were firing freely through the windows. Sebastian and his men threw themselves in front of those trying to face the door, and Philip, seizing Tim by the shoulder, dragged him away from the instrument.

“Tim, you cursed fool. Come along!”

“Just a second!”

He turned back to the instrument in spite of Philip’s protest, but had just clicked twice when Don Sebastian and his men were forced back and a crowd of the enemy rushed into the room. Philip, Jack, and Peter had already disappeared through the back, and Tim was left alone with Don Sebastian and the soldiers. The rebels threw themselves forward with yells of delight, when Tim, catching up a heavy table, flung it fair on the advancing mass, then bolted through the back door, dragging Don Sebastian after him. Two of the soldiers followed, and promptly closed the door when on the right side. At once the rebels commenced to beat it down with the butts of their rifles, but the Irishman and his friend had reached the back street.

Here they found their friends already mounted and waiting for them.

“Tim. De Ahumada! Mount at once!” cried Philip, pointing to three horses waiting under the shelter of the wall. “Make for the land-gate, and straight for the river.”

In another moment they were clattering towards the lower part of the town, keeping close together for safety. The street down which they were riding was quite deserted, as the fighting was principally confined to the main thoroughfares of the town. They could hear the brisk fire of musketry still kept up, the booming of the cannon, and the bursting of the shells. Shrieks of women, and yells of the victors broke incessantly through these noises, and the whole city was draped in a thick veil of stinking smoke.

“Oh, those poor women!” cried Philip, as he spurred his horse towards the gate. “Now they are in the clutches of those fiends.”

“I’m glad we’re not,” muttered Dr. Grench, thankfully.

“Anyhow,” said Tim, cheerfully, “I’ve sent the fall of the city to the paper.”

“Oh, hang your paper,” said Jack, whose wound was making him fractious. “Come along, De Ahumada.”

“Dios! How we have been beaten.”

Suddenly the street turned a sharp angle, and they found themselves before the gate. Most of the attacking party had marched towards the centre of the town to complete their victory, and only a few scattered soldiery were on guard. These yelled loudly as they saw the small party dash towards the gate. The valves were broken down; beyond was the country, and between this and safety was but a score of men.

Philip drew his sword, spurred his horse to its full speed, and made for the gate, cutting down a man who tried to stay him. Jack emptied two barrels of his revolver, and killed one man, wounding another. The rebel soldiers fired freely, and breaking Sebastian’s arm, also tumbled one of his company off his horse. Tim seizing Peter’s bridle-rein, galloped wildly through the spare crowd, cursing freely.

In their rush for the portal, they scattered them all. There were a few musket-shots, a howl of rage from the disappointed rebels, and at top speed they tore out of the gate, and made for the open country.

“Twenty miles,” cried Philip, settling himself in his saddle. “We can do that easily. Hurrah!”

“Provided we don’t fall into the hands of the Indians,” said Jack, sagely.

As for Don Sebastian, he turned round and shook his fist at Janjalla.

“Carajo!”

Chapter XXVIII

The Flight To Tlatonac

Boot and saddle, away! away!
We must be far e'er the breaking of day.
 The standard is down,
 The foe's in the town,
Forbidding us longer to stay, to stay.

Boot and saddle! we ride! we ride!
Over the prairie land side by side,
 Our foemen behind,
 Speed swift as the wind,
And gain on us steadily, stride by stride.

Boot and saddle! so fast! so fast!
We ride till the river be crossed and past;
 Then over the plain,
 With loose-hanging rein,
And find ourselves safe in the town at last.

Before them spread the plains, flat and desolate-looking, covered with coarse grass, and stretching towards the horizon in vague immensity. West-ward the faint flush of sunset, delicately pale, lingered low down, but otherwise the sky was coldly clear, darkly blue, thick sprinkled with chill-looking stars. To the right the leaden-hued waters of the river moving sluggishly between low mud banks, and on the left sandy wastes, alternating with hillocks and convex-shaped mounds. All this desolation appearing ghostly under a veil of mist exhaled whitely from the hot earth.

Over these monotonous plains galloped the six fugitives. Philip and Jack in the van, Don Sebastian and his one soldier in the rear; between Tim, side by side with Peter. For some time they urged on their horses in silence. Then a sudden flare of crimson caused them to turn in their saddles. The low walls of Janjalla were crowned with smoke, beneath which leaped tongues of flame, crimson and yellow. A rapid, disjointed conversation ensued.

“Those brutes are burning the city!”

“It will only be some drunken soldiers. Xuarez will soon put a stop to that. He cannot afford to lose his city of refuge, after paying so much to gain it.”

“Must we swim our horses across the river?” called out Grench, unexpectedly.

“Not unless the bridge is down. It was standing when we came this way a week ago.”

Philip answered the question, and then cast an anxious look at the sky.

“I wish the moon would rise,” he said disconsolately; “we need some light.”

“What the deuce would be the good of that when we’re on the high-road. Hang it, the moon would only show Xuarez how to follow us.”

“Que dici?” asked Don Sebastian, looking at Jack.

“The Señor Correspoñsal thinks we might be pursued.”

“I doubt it, Don Juan. Xuarez will be too busy checking the excesses of his soldiers. Besides, Señor, as we escaped in the confusion, it may be that we will not be missed for some hours.”

Peter, unaccustomed to riding, began to feel sore with this incessant galloping, and raised his voice in protest.

“I hope we will be able to rest at Centeotl. When do we reach it?”

“Before midnight, probably. Then we will rest till dawn, get fresh horses, and push on to Tlatonac.”

“Hope we’ll get there,” muttered Jack, shaking his reins. “But if the Indians—”

“Deuce take the Indians,” retorted Philip, irritably. “Come on Jack, and don’t worry so much.”

Their horses were fortunately quite fresh, having been mewed up in Janjalla without exercise for some weeks. Stretching their necks, they clattered along at a breakneck speed. The road was as hard as flint, and their iron-shod hoofs struck out sparks from the loose stones. The riders, with their heads bent against the wind whizzing past their ears, let the reins hang loosely, and pressed on with blind trust along the highway leading to Centeotl.

Here and there they passed a flat-roofed house, deserted by its occupants, and standing up lonely, a white splotch amid the vague gloom of its flat acreage. Clumps of trees loomed suddenly against the clear sky, at times a ragged aloe sprang spectral-like from the reddish soil, thorny thickets lay densely in the hollows, tall spear-grass waved on the tops of undulating drifts of sand, and at intervals an oasis of rank herbage would frame an oval pool thickly fringed with reeds.

The road wound onward, turning now to right, now to left, dipping into hollows, curving over eminences, stretching white and dusty towards the horizon like a crooked winding river. On either side they could mark the moving forms of animals, flying from the clatter of their horses’ hoofs, cattle, vicuñas, llamas, and flocks of sheep. The white peak of Xicotencatl arose suddenly like a ghost from the shadows of forests lying heavily along the verge of earth between plain and sky. A thin vapour lay white over the plain, and gathered thickly along the banks of the river. The horses stretched their necks and neighed loudly. They smelt the water of the stream.

“The bridge is down!” cried Jack, drawing rein at the verge of the stream. “Indians!”

“Or Xuarez!” added Philip, gravely. “I suspect the latter. Indians are not sufficiently civilised to destroy bridges.”

The *débris* of the bridge impeded the current, and here the waters boiled white amid the black ruins. Jagged posts stretched in black rows to the other side of the stream, but there was no foothold left by which they could cross dry-shod.

“Swim!” said Tim, briefly, and sent his steed down the bank. The others followed, and in a few minutes the surface of the stream was dotted with black figures. The river being sluggish, with little or no current,

they found no difficulty in crossing, and speedily gained the opposite bank. Climbing the slope on to the flat land, they regained the line of road, and once more urged their horses to full speed.

The moon arose, round and bright, making the whole scene cheerful with her kindly light. The fugitives looked back, but could see no sign of pursuit. Even the town had vanished. Behind, before, lay nothing but the immensity of the plains. It was as though they were in the midst of a leaden-hued sea. The appearance of the moon raised their spirits, and they redoubled their speed. Centeotl was now comparatively near. The ground began to show signs of cultivation. Hedges of cacti ran along the sides of the road, bearing fleshly looking flowers of tawny gold. Right and left stretched gardens, environing country houses, and before them arose a white line of wall.

“Centeotl!” cried Don Sebastian, pushing forward.

The gates were closed owing to the fear of the townspeople lest the Indians should make a night attack. De Ahumada galloped on ahead, and reined his horse immediately under the walls. At intervals the sentinels called the one to the other, “Centinella alerte,” to show that they were awake. The noise of the approaching horses brought them to the walls.

“Quien vive!”

“Amigos! From Janjalla.”

The red light of torches glared from the low battlements, and in a few minutes the gates were opened. The officer in charge recognised Don Sebastian, and was much depressed at learning Janjalla had fallen.

“Dios! It is Centeotl next that Xuarez will capture,” he said, disconsolately, and then led the fugitives to the house of the Jefe Politico.

That individual received them kindly, and gave them food and beds. He also promised them horses for the next morning, to push on to Tlatonac, but feared lest they should fall into the hands of the Indians, whom he believed were further north. The telegraph-wires between Centeotl and Hermanita had been destroyed by the savages. His town was now quite isolated in the plains. Only five hundred men were within its walls, and he expected it would be shortly besieged and captured by Don Hypolito, unless aid arrived from the capital.

During the night straggling parties of soldiers arrived from Janjalla for refuge. All brought the same tale. Janjalla was nearly in ruins, as the rebels had fired many houses, and the bombs and cannon had smashed others. Xuarez had kept all his men in the town, and was doing his best to reduce them to order; but many were beyond his control. There was no pursuit in any case. It was reported that he would throw forward two regiments of cavalry next day, to attack Centeotl.

“Santissima!” said the Jefe, in despair; “we are lost, Señores. When you arrive at Tlatonac, tell his Excellency that I am faithful to the Junta, but that my town is too weak to hold out against the rebels.”

De Ahumada promised and shortly afterwards, thoroughly worn out, they all composed themselves to sleep. It was impossible, however, to get much repose, as the constant arrival of fugitives, the clattering of horses through the streets, and the murmur of many voices, kept them awake. At dawn they were up at once, mounted fresh horses, and rode away from the town in the direction of Hermanita, twenty miles away.

They reached that town in two hours, and found the inhabitants in a state of terror. The Indians had been threatening for the last week, and had been scouring the country to the south. Now they had gone north,

and, it was believed, with the intention of making an attack on the Puebla de los Naranjos. Nor did the news brought by Jack and his friends reassure them in any way. What with the Indians in the north, and Xuarez threatening them in the south, there was no doubt that Hermanita was in a terrible fix. As had Centeotl, they also implored Don Sebastian to ask Gomez to send aid, lest they should fall victims to the rebels or to the Indians.

After taking a hurried meal, the fugitives once more proceeded on their way to the north. Towards noon they struck Puebla de los Naranjos, and found it a heap of ruins. Undefined as were the other towns by stone walls, the town was surrounded by orange groves, and had therefore been easily captured by the Indians. A few terrified survivors crept about the ruins of their houses, the streets were thick with dead bodies, and the whole place presented a scene of unexampled desolation. Those folks who survived said that the Indians had plundered the town two days previously, and had then departed with the intention of taking Chichimec. As this city was only distant twenty miles from the capital, the little party was quite appalled at the audacity of the savages. It showed how little they cared for the power of the Republic.

"If Gomez had crushed this rebellion at once, all would have been well," said Jack, as they rode from the smoking ruins of Puebla de los Naranjos; "but now it seems as though the Indians and Xuarez were going to have it all their own way."

"Gomez should have placed the command of affairs in the hands of a competent man, and not meddled with them," replied Philip, impatiently. "He keeps all his army in the capital, and lets the country be laid waste. The end will be that all the inland towns will join with Xuarez, and the capital will be besieged. With the whole of Cholacaca against it, the capital must fall."

"Unless the Junta can capture or sink the two remaining warships of Xuarez," said Don Sebastian, who was fearfully enraged at the destruction of the country.

"True! Then Xuarez won't be able to get more troops from Acauhtzin."

"He has got quite enough troops, as it is to make things unpleasant for the capital," said Tim, in Spanish, for the benefit of Don Sebastian. "Six thousand at Janjalla—five thousand Indians. Quite enough to invest the town. The Junta has but eight thousand troops in Tlatonac."

"Well, that's a good number!"

"Yes; but what with his own troops and the savages, Xuarez has three thousand to the good. Besides which, he is a capable general."

"If the Indians could only be detached from his cause, the rebellion might be crushed," said Jack, ponderingly. "It is the only way of saving the present Government."

"There is no chance of doing that," replied Tim, disconsolately. "The Indians are mad about the loss of the opal, and will fight like fiends to get it back."

"Perhaps they can be quietened by means of the opal!"

"Dios!" exclaimed Sebastian, turning in his saddle. "What mean you, Señor?"

"I have an idea," replied Jack, quietly. "It was suggested to me by a remark of Cocom's."

"And this idea?"

"I will not tell you at present, lest I should fail to carry it out, and thus disappoint your hopes. Wait till we reach Tlatonac."

"If we ever do get there," muttered Philip, savagely. "Now we are half way to Chichimec, gentlemen. There, according to report, the Indians are camped. I vote we make a detour, and reach Tlatonac in some other way. Do you know of a road, Don Sebastian?"

"No, Señor. I know not this country."

"I do!" cried Duval, suddenly. "I have been all over this portion. That is a good idea of yours, Philip! We must avoid the Indians. I know a road!"

"Bueno! Take the lead."

It was fortunate, indeed, that Philip suggested such an idea, and that Jack's knowledge of the country enabled them to carry it out, else they would assuredly have fallen into the hands of the Indians. Making a detour towards the coast, they managed to avoid Chichimec by some miles. They learned from a peon, whom they met making his way to Tlatonac, that the town was entirely invested by the savages, but that as yet, thanks to the strong walls, they had been unable to effect an entrance. The Jefe Politico had sent this peon to the capital with a request for immediate aid from Don Francisco.

"What, in God's name, can the President be thinking about?" cried Jack, on hearing this intelligence. "He is simply playing into the hands of his enemies."

"Things certainly look bad for the Junta, owing to his negligence. Janjalla captured by Xuarez. Puebla de los Naranjos ravaged, Chichimec invested. Perhaps, when the whole country is in the hands of Don Hypolito, this very wise ruler will bestir himself."

"Wait till I have a conversation with Don Miguel!" muttered Jack, striking the spurs into his horse. "We are outsiders, and cannot interfere with local politics; but it makes me sick to see how Gomez is fooling away his chances. If I can only rouse Don Miguel into making things hot for the President, I shall do so!"

"A house divided against itself—" began Peter; but Tim cut him short.

"Hold your tongue, Peter. Jack is quite right. Unless a good man is put at the head of affairs, Don Hypolito will enter Tlatonac within the month. It's a mighty black look-out for the Government. Don Francisco ought to be shunted at once."

The peon ran alongside them, and kept up with their horses in the most wonderful manner. It was noon when they left Puebla de los Naranjos, and it was now late at night. In ten hours they had come nearly fifty miles. Their horses were quite worn out, owing to the incessant galloping. Now they were within a mile of the capital, and already, in the dim light, could see the line of walls looming in the distance. They were glad it was dark, or, rather, comparatively so, as it afforded them a certain amount of protection from wandering Indian scouts.

"The luck holds!" said Philip, thankfully, as they rode towards the Puerta de la Culebra. "We have not seen a single savage since we left Janjalla."

"Had it not been for your forethought, Philip, they would have had our scalps by this time."

"My thought, but your actions, Jack. It was lucky you knew the country."

“A mutual admiration society, you are!” cried Tim, whose spirits were wonderfully light. “How do you feel, Peter?”

“Worn out,” replied the doctor, laconically.

“Faith. I’m not astonished. I’m bumped to death also. A hundred miles isn’t bad for an inferior rider like myself.”

“Oh, you are a war correspondent,” began Peter, fretfully, when his remarks were cut short by an exclamation from Sebastian.

“Dios! the gates are open! Soldiers are coming out!”

“Reinforcements for Janjalla. I’ve no doubt,” said Philip, grimly. “They are a trifle late. Come, gentlemen, let us see the officer in charge.”

They urged their jaded horses towards the gate. At the sight of the little party, the soldiers halted, and an officer rode to the front.

“From whence come you, Señores?” he asked in surprise.

“From Janjalla.”

“Janjalla? Why, we are just marching thither, Señor.”

“You can spare yourself the trouble!” replied Jack, grimly. “Janjalla has fallen.”

The news passed rapidly from mouth to mouth, and a cry of rage went up from the throng.

“Moreover,” added Jack, quietly. “Puebla de los Naranjos has been attacked and sacked by the Indians!”

Another cry of rage.

“And,” concluded this bearer of bad news, “Chichimec is now invested by six thousand savages.”

A low murmur of dismay ran through the lines. Calamity after calamity seemed to be falling on the heads of the Government. Suddenly a man rode through the gate at full speed, and pulling up his horse on its haunches, as he faced the party, made the same inquiry as had the officer.

“Janjalla,” cried Don Miguel Maraquando.

Jack uttered the same reply.

“Janjalla has fallen!”

Chapter XXIX

Exit Don Francisco Gomez

Depart, incapable!

You are no pilot to be at the helm when the ship is in danger;

The vessel of state labours in the turmoil of troublous waters,
Rocks this side, that side, she is drifting to leeward, shoals threaten
her stout timbers.
Round her rage the tempests which would sink her in waves of blood;
Only a skilful captain can pilot her into a safe haven.
You are not a skilful commander!
In fair weather you guided the ship in a meritorious fashion;
Now, when blow rebellious storms, you are not fit for the steering;
the danger renders you helpless—a child were a better helmsman;
No longer can you hold the ship of Republican fortunes in her right
course.
Captain! President! you are Captain—President no longer!
Depart! give way to one who can steer with clear head and keen eye.
Depart, incapable!

“Dear one!” cried Dolores, as Jack embraced her, in the patio. “At last do I see you once more. Santissima! how pale! What ragged clothes! and beards on all your faces.”

“Indeed, Dolores, a siege is not conducive to luxury. But we will go to my house; bath, shave, and dress. When we return, you will behold us as civilised beings.”

“You are wounded!”

“It is nothing—a mere scratch. How delighted I am to see your dear face once more, my Dolores.”

Eulalia put out her hand timidly under the shelter of her fan, and touched Philip gently on the hand. She was unable to do more, as Doña Serafina, severe, and vigilant, was present. Their engagement had not yet been made public.

“Querido,” she murmured, looking at her lover tenderly. “Constantly have I prayed for thee.”

Philip kissed her hand, and then that of Doña Serafina, to avert suspicion. The old lady was voluble, and after the first greetings were over, burst forth into speech with much dramatic gesture.

“Alas, señores! How sad look you all. Don Pedro! Pobrecito! And the city is in the hands of the rebels. Ay di mi! Ah, the evil ones! Yet, if they win on land, they lose at sea.”

“What is it you say, Señora?” asked Tim, ever on the alert for news.

“Have you not heard, Señor Correspoñisal? No; you have been away. Gracios á Dios! The torpederas have captured *The Columbus*.”

“Bravo!” cried Jack, delightedly; “this is indeed good news! And Rafael?”

“Rafael is here,” said that young man, hastily entering the court. “Ah, my dear friends, how delighted I am to behold you.”

“Even though we bring bad news?”

“Yes; for I can tell you good. We followed *The Columbus*, and by threatening to sink her with torpedoes, forced her to strike her flag. Now she is lying in the harbour, with a crew of our own men. Her rebel sailors are all in prison.”

“What about *The Iturbide*?”

“She is there also, but in a crippled condition. One of her masts was shot away by *The Columbus* before she surrendered.”

“And what do you do now?”

“Sail south to-morrow at dawn.”

“Alas!” said Jack, sadly, “you will be too late to relieve Janjalla.”

“Never mind,” replied Rafael, hopefully; “we shall capture or sink *The Cortes*, and bring her back to Tlatonac with the transports. Then Don Hypolito will be irrevocably cut off from Acauhtzin.”

“That does not matter to him,” interposed Philip, overhearing this remark; “he has most of his troops at Janjalla, and will simply hold the south instead of the north.”

“At all events, Señor Felipe, we have crushed him by sea.”

“It will be a more difficult task to crush him by land, especially as Don Francisco is so dilatory.”

“Don Francisco! Don Francisco!” cried Rafael, stamping his foot with rage. “He is not fit to be President. Through him have we lost Janjalla. Even my father, who was his firm supporter, has turned against him.”

“What do you say, Rafael?”

“I cannot tell you yet; but there will be a stormy meeting of the Junta to-morrow.”

“You are going to depose Don Francisco.”

“It’s not improbable.”

“More trouble,” said Tim, reflectively. “There will be three Presidents shortly. Don Francisco, Don Hypolito, and—Don Miguel!”

“No more, mi amigo,” said Rafael, doubtful even in his own house. “It is dangerous to speak like that—as yet.”

He added the last words significantly, and turned away. Jack was saying good night to Dolores, as he was quite worn out, and wanted to get back to his own house for a good night’s rest.

“Dolores,” he whispered, as he held her hand; “you have yet the opal?”

“Yes; surely.”

“Can you bear to part with it for the sake of the city?”

“You can do with it as you please, Juanito. But, what mean these words?”

“I have a plan whereby I can detach the Indians from the cause of Don Hypolito, and thus weaken his army. But the carrying out of the plan may entail the loss of the opal.”

“Let it go, so that it save Tlatonac,” replied Dolores, heroically, though, woman-like, she loved the jewel. “What is your plan?”

“I must see Cocom about it first. Then I will tell you my secret; but now we must go. Adios, querida.”

When the four friends left the Casa Maraquando, they were surprised to find themselves followed by Maraquando and his son. On reaching Jack’s house, Don Miguel begged the Englishman to give him a few moments’ conversation, and explained how matters stood at Tlatonac.

It appeared that Maraquando’s party were disgusted at the way in which the war was being conducted by Don Francisco, and wanted him to resign the Presidential chair. This Gomez was unwilling to do, and as he had yet many supporters, it was doubtful if they could force him into such a course. Now, however, that the news of the fall of Janjalla, the sack of Puebla de los Naranjos, and the investment of Chichimec had arrived, Don Miguel thought that he would be able to show plainly that the continuance of Don Francisco as President meant ruin to the Government.

The next day there was to be a meeting of the Junta, and Maraquando, explaining his designs to Jack, asked him for a full report of all that had taken place in the south, so as to plainly prove the incapacity of the President in conducting the war. The four friends thoroughly agreed with Maraquando’s view of the matter, and told him all that he wished to know, after which they retired to rest. Don Miguel, on the contrary, went back with Rafael to his own house, and there found a few members of his party waiting him, whom he informed of the consequence of the terrible series of blunders made by Gomez.

The next day there was a stormy debate of the Junta in the Palacio Nacional.

“I blame his Excellency for all that has taken place,” cried Maraquando, at the conclusion of a long and fiery speech. “By his negligence and timidity he has lost us our opportunity of crushing this rebellion in the bud. Had a few thousand soldiers been sent to Janjalla at the outbreak of the war, that city would not now be in the hands of the rebels. Nay, they would not have even gained a footing in the south. But, by withdrawing the garrisons from that seaport, from the inland towns, his Excellency had laid them open to capture, and they had been captured. Janjalla is in the power of Xuarez; by this time, for aught we know, Centeotl may have surrendered to his victorious army. Puebla de los Naranjos has been sacked by the Indian tribes, who should have been crushed at once. Now Chichimec is surrounded, and may fall at any time, yet no aid has been sent to the relief of the citizens. All these terrible disasters have been caused by the blundering of Don Francisco, by his incompetency. I call on him to resign his command into more capable hands, else will we see the foe at our gates, our city in ruins, and Cholocaca helpless, under the heel of the tyrant Xuarez!”

Don Francisco, bursting with indignation, replied, He had done his best! If he had sent forward troops to Janjalla, they might have been defeated, and then the capital would have fallen an easy prey to the rebels, through lack of garrison. As it was, the city could hold out for months; the walls were strong, the garrison were resolute, there was plenty of provisions.

He had held the army at Tlatonac to save the capital. Where, then, was the blunder in that? By sea, the forces of the Republic had been victorious. *The Pizarro* had been sunk, *The Columbus* captured, and now the torpederas were on their way to Janjalla harbour to force *The Cortes* to strike her flag. He had succeeded by sea. He would succeed on land. When the army of Xuarez was before the walls of Tlatonac the fate of the country could be decided in one battle. He refused to resign his position as President.

The partisans of Maraquando, the supporters of Gomez, broke out into noisy demonstrations, and the whole place was in an uproar. The one called upon Gomez to resign, the other denounced Maraquando as

a traitor. It seemed as though neither would give in, as though the capital would be divided into two hostile factions, when a solution of the difficulty was proposed by Padre Ignatius.

Making his appearance suddenly in the hall, the good priest first stilled the tumult by holding up his crucifix, and then begged to lay before the Junta a proposition which would suit all parties. It would never do, said the Padre, to depose Don Francisco. The pretext for war, alleged by Xuarez, was that Gomez ought to be deposed for breaking the Constitution of Cholocaca. They knew that His Excellency had not done so; that he had loyally upheld the freedom and laws of the Republic. If deposed by his own party, such a deposition would give colour to Xuarez's assertion that he had right on his side, and perhaps prejudice the inland towns in his favour. Better it would be to let Don Francisco still remain President till the date of the expiration of his office, four months hence, and in the meantime entrust the conduct of the war solely to Don Miguel Maraquando. By this arrangement his Excellency would still continue nominal head of Cholocaca, and the war could be conducted by Maraquando, without the responsibility resting on the President.

This proposition, seeming to be the only possible solution of the problem, was unanimously accepted by both parties. It is true that Gomez, who hated Maraquando like poison, sorely grudged giving up the command of affairs to his rival; but as he saw that the Junta wished it to be so, he was forced to yield. Don Miguel was, therefore, elected General of the army of the Republic, and Don Francisco was permitted to retain the civil rule. Then the meeting broke up, and Maraquando went off to take measures for the immediate relief of Chichimec, while Gomez, much mortified at the slight he had received, retired sullenly to his palace.

"What's the matter, Tim?" asked Jack, as they left the Palacio Nacional. "You ought to be pleased at witnessing such a stirring scene, instead of which you are like a bear with a sick head."

"And haven't I a cause?" replied Tim, gruffly. "Look at all this shindy going on, and I can't send a telegram to my paper."

"Oh, that's it, is it? Well, then, ask Philip to lend you *The Bohemian*, and go off to Truxillo at once."

"Begad, that isn't a bad idea anyhow," cried Tim, stopping suddenly; "but I don't want to leave Tlatonac just now."

"Well, you may be pretty certain Philip won't go, nor I. Why not send Peter? Write out your news here. Peter will take it, and old Benker will look after the yacht."

"How far is it to Truxillo?"

"A trifle over three hundred miles."

"Do you think Philip will lend me the yacht?"

"I'm sure he will. Let us ask him at once. He is flirting with Doña Eulalia in Maraquando's patio."

Tim, who had quite recovered his spirits at Jack's happy suggestion, started off at once to the Casa Maraquando. There was no necessity, however, for them to go so far, for they met their friend coming down the Calle Otumba. He hailed them at once.

"Tim! Jack! come along to the Puerta de la Culebra. News from Chichimec."

"What do you say?" roared Tim, plunging towards the speaker.

“Cocom came to the Casa Maraquando a few minutes ago, and told me that a messenger had arrived from Chichimec. He is at the Puerta de la Culebra.”

“The deuce!” cried Jack, in alarm, as they hurried along towards the gate; “perhaps it’s another request for relief.”

“If so, they will soon have it,” said Tim, quickly. “Don Miguel is going to send three thousand men this day to finish off these savages.”

“Ah, that is something like!” said Philip, approvingly; “there will be some chance of relieving the city with that force. I am glad Don Miguel has matters now in his own hands.”

“So am I. He’ll end the war in no time. I say, Philip, lend me the yacht.”

“What for? You are not going to Janjalla again?”

“No! I’m going further south. That is, I’m sending Peter with despatches.”

“Where to?”

“Truxillo! He can send off my telegrams from there. Lend me the yacht, Philip, and I’ll love you for ever more.”

“Oh, take her, by all means; but I hope she won’t be smashed up by the warships of Xuarez.”

“He’s only got one now,” replied Tim, coolly; “and she’ll have her hands full looking after the torpederas.”

“I forgot that! It’s a good idea, Tim! Get all the news together you can, and Peter shall go out with *The Bohemian* to-night, both of them in charge of Benker.”

“Do you think Peter will go?” said Jack, doubtfully.

“Of course he will,” said Tim, promptly. “The little man’s of no use here. I’ll make him Queen’s messenger for once in his life.”

“Hallo!” cried Philip, at this moment, “there’s old Cocom making signs. Ola, Cocom!”

The old Indian, who was hobbling on the other side of the street, came over to them with an excited look on his usually immobile face.

“Carambo, Señores! the news. The terrible news!”

“What is it?” cried the three Englishmen simultaneously.

“Chichimec has fallen!”

Jack uttered an ejaculation of rage, and darted off to the gate, followed by Tim and Philip. They found an excited throng of people talking wildly together. Don Sebastian was just under the archway, with his glasses to his eyes, looking towards the plains beyond.

“Is the news true of Chichimec’s fall?” asked Jack pushing his way through the crowd.

Don Sebastian turned slowly with a grave bow, and handed Jack the glasses.

“Quite true, Señor. See! fugitives are arriving every moment.”

Jack clapped the glass to his eye, and saw that the plain was sprinkled with people all making for the gate of Tlatonac.

“Why don’t you send out a regiment to protect them, De Ahumada?”

“It is going now. Behold, Señor.”

About five hundred men, well mounted, came trotting down the street, and began to file through the archway out on to the plain. Jack stood on one side and watched them go by in all their martial splendour.

“How did the Indians take the town, De Ahumada?”

“It was surprised last night,” replied Don Sebastian, sadly. “I expect the sentinels were worn out with constant watching. Dios! It is frightful. First Puebla de los Naranjos, now Chichimec; Janjalla has already fallen, and Tlatonac—”

“Won’t fall,” interrupted Jack, abruptly, as the last of the cavalry swept through the gate. “When things are at their worst, matters mend. Just now they are very gloomy. To-morrow they may improve.”

Tim stayed behind to make inquiries about the fall of Chichimec for the use of his paper, and Philip, in company with Jack, went off to look up Peter, and ask him if he would consent to act as Tim’s messenger to Truxillo. They could not find him in their own house, and learned from a servant that he had gone in search of them to the Casa Maraquando. At once they repaired thither, and had just reached the door, when Peter, with a look of alarm on his face, rushed out of the house, almost falling into their arms in his hurry.

“Philip! Jack! Have you heard?”

“What is the matter, Peter?”

“Don Francisco has shot himself! Don Miguel has just told me.”

Philip made a gesture of horror, and Jack ran into the house to see Maraquando, and learn the particulars of the case.

It was perfectly true. Unable to bear the disgrace of being deposed from the active conduct of affairs, President Gomez had retired to his room, and shot himself through the heart.

Chapter XXX

The Indian Raid

Painted braves came on the war-path,
Numerous as the leaves in summer,
Decked with feathers and with wampum,
All their faces fierce and fearless,

Streaked with colours like the sunset,
Rage was in their hearts of iron;
Spears grasped they, and bows and arrows,
And their horses, like the storm clouds,
Swiftly swept across the prairies,
Till the firm earth shook and trembled
'Neath the thunder of their thousands.
Loud they sang the song of battle,
Sang the song of war and bloodshed;
While the nations, women-hearted,
Hid within their walled cities,
Like the rabbits in their burrows,
When they heard that chaunt triumphal.

Certainly, fate was dealing hardly with the Republic of Cholocaca. One blow followed another, and it seemed as though the final catastrophe would be the triumphal entry of Don Hypolito Xuarez into the capital. Janjalla was in his possession; he now threatened Centeotl, and the two towns of Puebla de los Naranjos and Chichimec had been destroyed by his savage allies. The unexpected death of Don Francisco Gomez put the finishing touch to this series of calamities, and the whole city was pervaded by a feeling of dismay. Disquieting rumours crept among the people that Xuarez had captured Centeotl and Hermanita—that he was now on his way to Tlatonac—that the death of President Gomez was due to his machinations. These fabrications, gaining additions as they flew from mouth to mouth, carried fear into the hearts of the citizens, and many were of the opinion that nothing was left save surrender to the insolent conqueror.

The Junta met within an hour of the intelligence of Don Francisco's death, and unanimously elected Don Miguel Maraquando as President of the Republic. Even the party of the dead ruler supported this election, as they could not fail to see that Maraquando would make an exceptionally vigorous and firm-handed President. Though there was no doubt that Don Francisco had committed suicide out of pique at being deposed from the active command of affairs, yet the Junta, ignoring the manner of his death, and thinking only of his past services, decreed the late President a state funeral.

The houses of the city were draped in black, the flags floated half-mast high, the minute guns boomed at intervals from the forts, and, with all due formalities, President Gomez was interred in the vaults of the Cathedral. When the ceremony was at an end, a weight seemed to be lifted off the city. The bad fortune which had persistently dogged the later months of Don Francisco's rule seemed to be passing away, and, under the vigorous leadership of Maraquando, the capital became wildly patriotic. One idea pervaded the minds of all—that the war was to be ended at once, and that Xuarez was to be crushed by prompt and well-conceived measures.

After the Indians had sacked Chichimec, it was naturally expected that they would march southward and join Don Hypolito before Centeotl. Instead of this, however, the savages began to threaten the capital, and daily bands of well-horsed braves would scour the plains before the Puerta de la Culebra. Sometimes the soldiers on guard, exasperated by this insolent defiance of the principal city of Cholocaca, would dash out in small parties; but on such a sally being made, the Indians always disappeared. The bulk of their army still lay (as was ascertained by spies) at Chichimec, and it seemed as though these scouting parties were anxious to draw the troops of the Junta from behind the walls, so as to fall on them in the open plain.

President Maraquando was anxious to march his whole army south, and encounter Don Hypolito in the neighbourhood of Centeotl. In order to do this, he would have to overcome the hordes of savages which formed a living barrier between Tlatonac and Chichimec. This entailed some risk. If beaten by the Indians, he would have to fall back on the capital in a crippled condition, and thus give Xuarez time to increase and discipline his army. Then, again, even if he did succeed in conquering these bloodthirsty tribes, he

would in all probability lose many of his men, and be forced to encounter Don Hypolito's fresh soldiers with jaded and diminished troops.

At one time he thought of waiting until the return of the torpederas from Janjalla, and then embarking his troops on *The Iturbide*, proceed southward to attack Xuarez in the rear. Even there the savages would have to be reckoned with, and during his absence, and that of the greater portion of his troops, would perhaps attack the capital. Besides, Maraquando did not wish to risk an expedition to Janjalla unless *The Cortes* were either sunk or captured. Altogether, he was in a state of much perplexity, and the only way by which he could make a move was to detach the Indians from the cause of Xuarez. This task was accomplished by Jack Duval in what seemed to be almost a miraculous fashion.

The new President entertained a great opinion of Duval's abilities. He invariably found him clear-headed and shrewd, capable of giving good advice, and wonderfully prompt in coming to a decision in time of emergency. Therefore, when, shortly after the death of Don Francisco, the young man called to see him at the Casa Maraquando, with a view to lay a certain proposition before him useful to the Republic, Don Miguel interviewed him at once, and gave him his fullest attention.

Some time since, Peter, with Tim's notes, had started in *The Bohemian* for Truxillo, and at the last moment Philip had decided to go with him. Jack desired to confer with Maraquando about his proposed scheme, and to be on the spot in order to carry it out. Tim was afraid to leave the capital lest he should miss some stirring event likely to be of value to his paper; but Philip had no special reason for remaining constantly at Tlatonac, unless for the sake of Doña Eulalia. Dr. Grench did not object to go to Truxillo in *The Bohemian*, but on observing that he would feel more at ease regarding the navigation of the vessel if Philip commanded her, the baronet promptly decided to go. It was a good thing for Peter that old Benker had not heard this reflection on his seamanship, else he would have been much displeased. At all events, Peter, by artfully putting the matter in this light, secured Philip for his companion, and the yacht had departed the previous day for Honduras. She was expected back in four days, and Philip determined on his return voyage to stand in close to the shore of Janjalla, and assure himself of the result of the expedition against *The Cortes*.

Jack made his appearance in the patio in the company of Cocom, whose presence he required in the delicate proposal he had to make. He intended to appeal to the superstitious side of the Indian character, and wanted Cocom to back up his opinion so as to induce Don Miguel to give his consent to an experiment he desired to attempt connected with the harlequin opal. Don Miguel was on the azotea smoking endless cigarettes, and glancing over some papers relating to the Civil Government. His secretary was present, but when Duval appeared, the President sent him below with the documents, and received Jack and his factotum alone. Jack took a seat by the President, and Cocom, rolling a cigarette, squatted on the floor, wrapped in his zarape.

"Where is the Señor Correspoñsal?" asked Don Miguel, solemnly, after the first greetings had passed between them.

"At the Puerta de la Culebra," replied Jack, taking the cigar offered to him by the old gentleman. "I asked him to wait there, Señor, as in an hour or so the peon sent by your Excellency to Chichimec is expected back."

"Bueno! But what news do you expect by the peon?"

"News that the Indians contemplate an advance on Tlatonac!"

"Por todos Santos! Don Juan, such a thing cannot be. The Indians would not dare to so insult the majesty of the Republic."

Jack privately thought the majesty of the Republic had been pretty well insulted already, but wisely refrained from giving voice to such an opinion.

“The Indians, Excelencia!” he said, smoothly, “are, according to trustworthy reports, six thousand strong, and thus think themselves a match for even the capital of Cholacaca. They have reduced Puebla de los Naranjos to ashes, they have sacked Chichimec without hindrance, and, excited by such victories, have rashly determined to attack Tlatonac on their own account without waiting for the arrival of Xuarez.”

“Do you really think they will dare to camp under our walls?” asked Don Miguel, still incredulous.

“I really do think so, Excelencia,” replied Jack, frankly. “If you think I am too rash in pronouncing such an opinion, question our friend Cocom. He has already rendered great services to you and to the Republic. Therefore, you must know that he speaks truth. Speak to him, Señor.”

The President turned his eyes towards the old Indian, who, impassive as an idol, sat at his feet smoking a cigarette. He answered Maraquando’s inquiring look with a grunt of assent to Jack’s remark.

“I am a true Indian, Excelencia! Of the Mayas I am, and my name is that of their kings. Cocom speaks now the truth. Don Xuarez is also an Indian, he comes from the hidden city of Totatzine. He has an understanding with the high-priest, Ixtlilxochitli. Don Hypolito said war, and the Chalchuih Tlatonac, through the priests of Huitzilopochtli, said war. Therefore are six thousand Indians in arms. Now the opal is in the possession of the enemies of the god—in Tlatonac, a city hated by Ixtlilxochitli and Xuarez. They have told their fighting men that this war is a holy war, for the recovery of the sacred shining stone. Were it not for the opal, the Indians would not dare to come to Tlatonac even with six thousand braves. But it is a holy war. They will dare anything to recover the sacred stone. Therefore will they come here, Excelencia, and camp under your walls. This is the truth, I swear by the shrine of the Holy Mother of God.”

“It might be so,” said Maraquando, musingly; “the opal is in Tlatonac, without doubt. My niece has it in her chamber, and knowing how sacred the Indians hold the gem, I doubt but that they will fight boldly to gain it again for the hidden shrine of their God, Huitzilopochtli.”

“Assuredly, Don Miguel. And to gain it they will come to Tlatonac.”

“That must not be!” cried the President, emphatically; “I will send an army against them, and encounter their host at Chichimec.”

“With what result, Señor? Even if you conquered, the victory would cost you many men, and thus would your army be weakened to encounter Xuarez.”

“True, true! Don Juan. But what then is to be done.”

“Let the Indian army come to Tlatonac. Let them camp under the walls. Close the gates of the city, and make no hostile sign.”

“What say you, Señor?” said Maraquando, in a fiery tone. “Would you have me leave this savage foe in peace till joined by Don Hypolito—by the rebel Xuarez?”

“They will not be joined by Xuarez, Don Miguel. When the rebels arrive, they will find no savage allies under the walls of Tlatonac.”

“If it could be so, it would be well. But how, Señor, do you propose to make this savage army vanish without a blow?”

“By means of the Chalchuih Tlatonac.”

“I do not understand, mi amigo. Explain, if you will be so gracious. I am all attention.”

Jack began to explain without further preamble.

“Observe, Excelencia,” he said slowly, so that Don Miguel could have no difficulty in following his reasons, “It is now noon—this night, if I mistake not, the Indian army will come to Tlatonac—”

“Bueno!” interrupted Cocom, nodding his head like a mandarin, “I have heard this thing spoken with many tongues. Your messenger, Excelencia, will confirm what I say. The Indian army will march this night for Tlatonac. At dawn will you see them encamped round the walls.”

“Proceed, Don Juan,” said the President, gravely.

“As you can see, Señor Maraquando,” pursued Jack, emphasising his remarks with his finger, “the savages will not arrive till night, so as it is now but noon, we will have time to make ready for their arrival.”

“Dios! You said make no preparations!”

“Not hostile preparations! No, Señor; listen, I pray you. We have the Chalchuih Tlatonac, the properties of which are regarded with superstitious reverence by the Indians. What the opal commands they will do. When it glows red, they prepare for war. Let an azure ray shine, and they know that the god commands peace, and, at whatever cost, will lay down their arms.”

“How is this done, this glowing of red, of blue?”

“I will explain, Señor. In the hidden city I saw it. The opal hung by a golden thread before the shrine of Huitzilopochtli, and this thread was twisted in a certain way by the priests. By careful calculation, they could tell how far it would untwist, so that the opal stone depended motionless, showing the colour they wished. If they desired war, the red side of the stone revealed itself—if peace the blue. To prophesy plenty, the yellow ray came to the front, and so on with all the tints.”

“Then you say, Don Juan, that if these Indians saw the opal glowing blue, they would lay down their arms?”

“Assuredly, Señor! and withdraw at once to Totatzine, leaving Xuarez to meet the forces of the Junta alone. If the stone glows blue, they know it is the will of the god that they should not fight.”

Don Miguel smiled incredulously.

“I doubt, Señor, whether these warriors, flushed with the sacking of Puebla de los Naranjos and Chichimec would obey the stone now, even though it glowed blue and thus proclaimed peace.”

“Excelencia!” broke in Cocom, earnestly, “you know, not the power of the Chalchuih Tlatonac. I, Señor am a good Catholic. I believe not in the devil stone; but my countrymen, Señor, think that the spirit of the god Huitzilopochtli dwells in the gem. They believe that he would punish them with plagues unto death were they to disobey his will as conveyed by the opal. The shining precious stone is the strongest thing in

the world to them. Believe me, Excelencia, that when the warriors see the stone glow blue, even were they on the eve of entering Tlatonac, they would lay down their arms and retire to the forests.”

“I trust this may be so,” said Maraquando, addressing himself to Jack, not unimpressed by the Indian’s speech; “but where, Señor Duval, do you propose to let them see the opal?”

“In the chapel of Padre Ignatius, outside the walls,” replied Jack, promptly. “Cocom knows where there is an image of the war-god. He will set it up on the altar of the chapel. Before it, by a thread, we will hang the sacred stone. At dawn all will be ready, and Cocom can so twist the thread that when the opal hangs motionless it will glow blue. The Indians will arrive during the night. At dawn they will spread themselves through the suburbs, and enter the chapel of the good Padre. There they will see the image of their god, the sacred splendour of the opal. They will kneel down and worship, watching the twisting of the gem. When it stops and glows blue, then will they know Huitzilopochtli is satisfied with the sacking of the two towns, and now commands peace. Before noon, Excelencia, there will not be a single Indian left before the walls. They will retire into the forests, to the sacred city of Totatzine, and thus will Xuarez lose his allies.”

Maraquando listened to this proposal in silence, his cheek resting in the palm of his right hand, nor when Jack had concluded did he alter his position. He mused long and deeply, neither of his guests attempting to interrupt his meditations. This idea of detaching the Indians from Xuarez, by means of the opal, seemed to him to be childish. That an army of six thousand untutored savages flushed with victory should voluntarily retire at the bidding of Huitzilopochtli spoken through the stone, seemed improbable. But then Maraquando had never been to Totatzine, he did not know in what extreme veneration the opal was held by the Indians, and thus deemed Jack’s proposition weak, when in reality it could scarcely have been stronger. Nothing is so powerful as superstition, and to work on the minds of the Indians through their abject belief in the virtues of the shining precious stone was a master-stroke on the part of Duval.

“It seems to me,” said Maraquando, at length raising his eyes, “that the carrying out of this scheme will entail the loss of the opal.”

“Without doubt, Señor,” replied Duval, coolly; “but by such a sacrifice you gain more than you lose. The Indians will desert Xuarez, you will be able to march your army south, and conquer him in the neighbourhood of Centeotl before he has time to approach nearer to the capital. Then you can crush his nest of traitors in Acauhtzin. Better lose the opal than Tlatonac, and if we do not succeed in getting rid of the Indians it may be that the city will fall.”

“What says my niece Doña Dolores?”

“I have spoken to her, Señor, and for the sake of the city, she is willing to run the risk of losing the jewel.”

Don Miguel smiled approvingly. He was patriotic himself, and liked to see the same quality displayed by all his family. At the same time, he was a just man, and knowing how Dolores loved the gem, did not care about taking advantage of her offer to sacrifice the same, unless she voluntarily consented to surrender the sacred stone.

“We will ask the lady herself,” he said, rising from his chair. “One moment, Señor; I shall return with my niece.”

He disappeared down the staircase leading to the patio, and Jack was left alone with Cocom.

“It may be that the Indians will not dare to take the jewel,” said Jack, looking at the old man.

Cocom uttered a grunt which might have meant anything.

“Rest content, Don Juan. Once the Chalchuih Tlatonac leaves the walls of the city, it will never return again. Back to the sacred shrine of Totatzine shall it go. The high priest has ordered it be sought for far and wide, lest the god afflict the people with plagues for its loss.”

“Still, if I remained in the chapel, and watched it.”

“You, Señor? Nay, that, indeed, would be rash. The Indians would slay you. Only one will watch the jewel; but that one cannot prevent the worshippers seizing it.”

“You mean yourself?”

“It is said. I speak of Cocom. He shall sit by the image of the god, when the Indians enter the chapel of the good father.”

“But the Indians might slay you, Cocom.”

“That which is to be must be,” replied the old man, stolidly. “Cocom must watch the sacred gem, so that it sends the blue ray of peace from its breast. The tribes have been told by Ixtlilxochitli that Cocom is a traitor, and false to the worship of the old gods. When he is seen, he must die.”

“But my friend, I—”

“Be silent, Señor. Not you nor any man can turn aside the spear of Teoyamiqui. Why should I murmur if death be my portion? I am old, I am mutilated, I am weary of life. If I die I die, and for the safety of the white people. It may be, Señor, that, as says the good Padre, Cocom shall go to the heaven of the Christians. With the Virgin such going rests.”

Jack found no words to reply to this speech, and remained silently thinking of how he could save the old man from death. He had as yet arrived at no conclusion, when Don Miguel appeared with his niece on the floor of the azotea. Dolores ran towards Jack and threw herself into his arms.

“Querido,” she said in a tender voice, “my good uncle tells me of your scheme. It is that of which you spoke to me. It may save Tlatonac from savage foes, and thus do I aid you to the extent of my powers.”

She held out the opal towards him.

“You may lose it altogether, Dolores.”

“No matter, Juanito. It may save the city.”

“And you consent to this sacrifice, Don Miguel?”

“Yes, Señor. I think it will turn aside this host of savages. With them away, we can hope to conquer Xuarez. Otherwise—” Maraquando stopped suddenly, and made a gesture of despair.

“Of course it is merely an experiment,” said Jack, doubtfully.

“But one which must be successful,” cried Dolores, quickly. “Querido, can you doubt that, after what we saw in the sacred city? As the god speaks through the opal, so will the Indians act. Let it dart, then, its blue ray, and drive them back to their forests.”

“You are sure you can make it shine blue, Cocom?”

“Señor,” said the old man, with great dignity, “I give my life to prove that this shall be so.”

Jack took the opal from the outstretched hand of Dolores.

“So be it!” he cried, fervently. “The opal has brought the Indians to Tlatonac; the opal shall send them back again to Totatzine.”

Tim suddenly made his appearance with a face full of excitement.

“Jack! Señor Maraquando!” he said, quickly, in Spanish, “the messenger you sent to spy on the Indians at Chichimec has returned.”

“What does he say, Señor Correspoñsal?”

“That the whole host of Indians are marching from Chichimec, and will be camped round the walls at dawn. Dios! We are lost!”

“No,” cried Jack, brightly, “we are saved!”

“What the deuce will save us, Jack?” asked Tim, in English.

“This!”

Duval held up the harlequin opal. A ray of sunlight struck the jewel, and a blue ray darted out like a tongue of steel.

“Bueno!” said Cocom, stolidly, “the Chalchuih Tlatonac prophesies peace.”

Chapter XXXI

The Luck Of The Opal

The red ray dies in the opal stone,
The god hath spoken,
Arrow and bow and spear be broken,
Red of war is the fiery token,
And lo! in the zone,
It pales, and fades, and faints, and dies,
As sunsets wane in the eastern skies.
The blue ray glows in the opal’s heart,
The god is smiling,
Victims no more need we be piling,
On altar stone for his dread beguiling;
The blue rays dart
To tell us war must surely cease,
So in the land let there be peace.

Jack at once proceeded to execute his project. Fortunately Padre Ignatius had gone south in *The Iturbide*, thinking his ministrations might be required by the wounded, else Duval would never have gained the good priest's consent to such a desecration of his chapel. As it was, Jack hoped to carry out his scheme, and restore the chapel to its original state before the return of the old man. The actual elevation of a heathen idol on the shrine of the Virgin, not being seen by Padre Ignatius, he would think less of the sacrilegious act, more especially when he would find on his return the altar in nearly the same state as when he left it. Being a Protestant, Jack had no scruples about the matter, and Cocom was such a queer mixture of paganism and Catholicism, that his views were not very decided. He believed in the Virgin certainly; but seeing that her altar was required to save the city, Cocom thought that she surely would not object to the conversion for a time of her chapel into a heathen temple. Besides, if this was not done, the Indians would be sure to destroy the shrine, so it was best to make an attempt to avert such a disaster, even in such an illegitimate way, rather than risk the whole place being destroyed by the savages. This was Cocom's idea in the matter, therefore he proceeded to put an image of Huitzilopochtli in the place occupied by the cross. Father Ignatius would have died of horror had he witnessed such daring.

All the afternoon they laboured to transfer the chapel into a semblance of the temple of the war-god, and at length succeeded in making it a very fair representation. Huitzilopochtli, his left foot decked with humming-bird feathers, was set up on the shrine itself, a small altar on which a fire was lighted burned before him, and the walls were draped with mats of featherwork and pictured linen, whereon were depicted the hideous forms of Aztec deities. From the roof, by a golden thread, hung the famous opal, spinning in the dim light. After some calculation, Cocom made a hole in the roof of the chapel, so that when the sun rose over the walls of the city his beams would pour through the opening and bathe the gem in floods of gold.

Where Cocom had discovered all this idolatrous paraphernalia Jack could not make out, nor would the old Indian tell. But it confirmed Duval in his belief that in the near neighbourhood of Tlatonac the natives still worshipped the gods of their ancestors, for the celerity with which Cocom had produced statue, pictured linen, and altar, pointed to the existence of some hidden temple close at hand. In fact, despite Cocom's asseverations to the contrary, Jack began to be doubtful as to his really being a Christian, for he betrayed far too much knowledge of paganism in its worst form to be quite orthodox. One thing, however, was certain, that, pagan or not, Cocom was greatly incensed against Ixtlilxochitli for maiming him, and was doing his best to thwart the plans of the savage old priest.

Things having been thus arranged, towards sunset Jack tried to persuade Cocom to return with him to the city, and leave the opal to work out its own spell. This the obstinate octogenarian refused to do, averring that without his personal superintendence the scheme would fail. Jack unwilling that a man from whom he had derived so many benefits should be left unprotected amid a horde of bloodthirsty savages, insisted on remaining with him to keep vigil during the night. This offer Cocom also refused, and implored Jack to return at once to the city, and have the gates closed, as it was near sunset, and the Indian army would soon be close at hand.

"Leave me here, Señor," he said, with quiet obstinacy. "It may be that I fall not into their hands. They may take the opal—that is sure—but they may not take me. If you remain, your white skin will attract their fury, and they may sacrifice you before that very altar you have assisted to rear. I am an Indian, a Maya. Dog does not bite dog. It may be that I shall escape."

"Not if Ixtlilxochitli can help it."

"Oh, that evil one! He would have my blood, I know, Don Juan. But behold, Señor, if I—as the Indians, my countrymen, think—took the opal from Totatzine, I now bring it back again. That may save me!"

"But, Cocom—"

“Depart, Señor; I have my own plans. What says the proverb of the white people? ‘Every one is master of his own soul.’ Go! I save mine as I will!”

It seemed to Jack that Cocom was desirous of wearing the crown of martyrdom. However, it was useless to turn him from his purpose, as he was obstinately set on daring the fury of the Indians. Jack, for a moment, thought of employing force, and looked at the spare frame of the old man, with the idea of picking him up and bearing him inside the city. Perhaps something of his purpose showed itself in his eyes, for Cocom suddenly darted out of the chapel and disappeared. Though he searched everywhere, Jack was unable to find him, so proceeded to the Puerta de la Culebra, and reported his arrival to Don Sebastian, who was stationed there in command of the guard.

“And the Indian, Señor?”

“Refuses to come within, Don Sebastian. He says he is safe outside.”

De Ahumada shrugged his shoulders, and made the same remark as had Cocom some quarter of an hour before.

“Bueno! Dog does not bite dog.”

Then he ordered the gates to be closed, which was accordingly done. It was now too late to alter existing circumstances, and the whole chances of detaching the Indian host from the cause of Xuarez lay with Cocom and the opal. Jack went off to the Casa Maraquando, in order to inform Don Miguel of all that had been done, and then rewarded himself for that wearisome afternoon by chatting with Dolores. It had been deemed advisable, by Don Miguel, to keep Jack’s scheme secret, lest, should the attempt fail, and the opal be lost, the populace should lose heart in the forthcoming struggle with Xuarez. So long as the opal was in the city, they deemed themselves invincible; so, whether the attempt to detach the Indians succeeded or failed, Maraquando determined that the people of Tlatonac should still think that the sacred stone was in the possession of his niece.

Late that night Jack went on the walls with Tim, and together they watched the Indians gather round the walls. Above the Puerta de la Culebra was fixed a powerful electric light, which irradiated a considerable portion of the space beyond the gate. Without the walls there was quite a town, as the huts of the peons stretched away in long lines, alternating with palms, cacti, aloes, and densely foliaged ombú trees. Close to the gate these huts clustered thickly together, but after a time became scattered, and finally ceased on the verge of the plains, where the ground was thickly covered with brushwood.

The Indians, fearful of the guns protruding from the walls, and doubtful of the weird glare of the electric light, kept away beyond the line of huts, and finally camped in the open ground beyond. Notwithstanding the distance they kept from the town the powerful rays of electric light blazed full on their camp, and caused them considerable uneasiness. The two Englishmen could see their tall, dark forms, gliding like ghosts through the white radiance, and at times a mounted troop of horsemen would dash furiously across the circle of light, disappearing into the further darkness. Just below, a stone’s throw from the wall, arose the little chapel of Father Ignatius, beneath whose roof Cocom, with the opal, awaited the dawn.

For some hours Jack watched the strange sight that savage picture, starting out of the surrounding darkness, and ultimately retired to his house, hopeful that before noon of the next day all the Indians would have disappeared. Tim remained behind, talking to Don Sebastian, and scribbling notes in his book; but at last he also went to rest, and the wall was left in possession of De Ahumada and his guard. All night long the electric light flashed its beams on the camp, so as to guard against an unexpected attack by the Indians.

At dawn, the savages were up and doing before sunrise. They gathered together in groups, and talked of how they were to attack this formidable city, whose colossal walls bid defiance to their puny weapons. They could see soldiers moving along the ramparts, the black muzzles of the guns frowning fiercely down, and wondered at the absolute indifference of the Republic, who thus permitted her hereditary enemies to camp before the gates of her principal city. Everything within the town was quiet, the gates were firmly closed, no peons were to be seen moving about the suburbs, and the Indians, blackening the plain with their thousands of men and horses stood perplexed before this intensely silent town.

The east was flaming redly over the ocean waves. The Indians could see the long line of battlements black against the clear crimson sky. No wind blew across the desert, and the great banner of the opal hung motionless from its tall staff. Suddenly, in the red sky, a yellow beam shot up into the cold blue of the zenith; another and another followed, spreading like a gigantic fan. The savages threw themselves on their knees, and held up their hands in supplication to the great deity, who was even now being invoked with sacrifice in the hidden town of Totatzine.

The gold of the sky seemed to boil up behind the walls of the town, as though it would run over in yellow streams. Then the dazzling orb appeared, and fierce arrows shot across the green suburbs to the sandy desert, where those thousands of naked Indians were kneeling. Suddenly a man started in surprise, and looked inquiringly at his companions. They listened as he had done, and also looked astonished. In a miraculously short space of time the whole host were in a state of commotion. Those in front stood still in a listening attitude, those behind pressed forward to hear this miracle which had startled their companions. Loud and shrill arose the song from the chapel of Padre Ignatius. It was the hymn of the opal daily chaunted by the priests of Huitzilopochtli in the city of Totatzine.

The chiefs hastily gathered together, and consulted as to the meaning of this prodigy. Never before had the sacred song been heard beyond the shrine of the sacred city, and now its music was thrilling through the still morning air under the very walls of the capital. The mystery must be solved at any cost, and commanding their warriors to wait in the camp, all five chiefs, the leaders of the host, flung themselves on their horses, and galloped bravely up to the chapel. It was a dangerous thing to do, for at any moment those terrible guns might vomit forth fire and death; but the chiefs did not care. Fanaticism, dread of the gods, was their most powerful characteristic, and dismounting from their horses, they entered the door of the chapel whence the chaunt of the opal proceeded.

At the entrance they stood transfixed with surprise, and for the moment deemed they were in the Shrine of the Opal at Totatzine. Half-veiled by clouds of white smoke rolling upward from a small altar, they could see the terrible features of Huitzilopochtli, in all his blood-stained glory. The mats of feather-work hung glittering from the walls; they marked the grotesque visages of their deities scowling from pictured walls, and behind the altar, the hidden minstrel chaunted the hymn of the opal.

The opal! There it hung in the centre of the white smoke. A ray of golden light, like a finger from heaven, smote it with terrible glory. It was turning rapidly, as they had seen it in the temple of the god at Totatzine.

“Chalchuih Tlatonac!” they cried, and all five prostrated themselves before the sacred gem. High and shrill rang out the song from the hidden singer, and the chiefs, with reverential awe, watched the spinning opal. Red, yellow, blue, green, the rays flashed out jets of many-coloured fire every second. It began to revolve more slowly. Slower and slower! a pause!—it hung motionless, and a ray of azure shone benignly from its breast.

The song ceased, and a tall man, arrayed in white garments, came from behind the shrine, holding a blue cloak full length in his arms. This was the ritual prescribed at the shrine of Huitzilopochtli when the god spoke through the opal.

“The god proclaims peace!”

His voice broke the spell. The Indians dashed forward, and strove to seize him, but he eluded their grip, and vanished.

“Peace! Peace! Peace!” they heard him cry three times. Their attention was fixed on the opal, and they did not pursue him.

“The sacred stone!” cried the supreme chief; “we must bear it back to the shrine of the god. Forgive us, oh, holy one.”

He snapped the stone off the string, and darted out of the door, followed by his four companions. At the door an old Indian, now divested of his sacerdotal garments, met them, and rushed on their principal with a cry of anger.

“The opal! Give me back the sacred gem!”

“Cocom!” cried the chief, raising his tomahawk. “It was thou who thieved the gem! Die, vile wretch, who desecrated the shrine of the god.”

His companions restrained his wrath. The fear of the opal was on them.

“Nay, Tezuco. The god says peace! The stone burns blue rays.”

“Bind him, then, and we will take him to Totatzine; there to be sacrificed on the altar of the offended god.”

In a moment Cocom, in spite of his struggles, was thrown across the back of the horse of one of the chiefs, and they all rode off rapidly towards the camp. In the centre of the throng, Tezuco halted, and held up his hand. Therein flashed the opal, and a cry of delight arose from the host, who in a moment recognised the gem, and at once prostrated themselves before its glory.

“Children of the war-god. This hath been given to us again. We saw the stone revolve—we saw it stay. Blue was the ray of the gem. Blue, my children, is the sign of peace. Huitzilopochtli, the lord of war, is appeased. He proclaims peace. No longer wait we here. To Totatzine!”

“To Totatzine!” roared the vast host, and, at a signal, rushed for their horses. War, plunder, Xuarez, all was forgotten. The blue ray of the opal proclaimed peace, and this vast host, laying down its arms, departed at the bidding of the god.

The townspeople on the walls of the city saw with amazement the Indians suddenly, without any apparent reason, strike their camp, and file off in long lines towards the north. Astonished at the sight, Don Sebastian sent off a message to the President.

In a quarter of an hour he arrived at the Puerta de la Culebra, followed by Jack and Tim.

“Behold, Señor!” cried Jack, triumphantly pointing to the myriads tramping across the plain. “Did I not speak truly? The opal has done its work.”

“The opal! The opal!” murmured those around him, and the cry being caught up by the populace, passed from one mouth to another. The crowd on the walls, seeing in the departure of the Indians the influence of the opal, began to cry out madly. They deemed that the opal was still within the walls of Tlatonac.

“Viva el opale! El Chalchuih Tlatonac!”

“Bueno!” said Maraquando, with satisfaction, shaking Jack by the hand; “you were right, Señor. The Indians will give us no more trouble. Now we can crush Xuarez in the south. Señor de Ahumada open the gates!”

In a few moments His Excellency, followed by Jack, Tim, and Don Sebastian, was galloping in the direction of the chapel. They reached it, dismounted, and entered. The opal was gone and Cocom also!

“I knew we would lose the opal,” said Jack, cheerfully; “but I thought they would kill Cocom. Fortunately they have only taken him prisoner.”

“To reserve him for a more cruel death in Totatzine, Señor,” replied Maraquando, his delight slightly damped. “He has served the Republic well. I would he could have been saved.”

“Poor devil!” murmured Tim, in English, as they remounted their horses. “In any case, Jack, his death has saved the Republic. Now the savages have gone away, it won’t be difficult to thrash Don Hypolito.”

At the city gates a new surprise awaited them. Don Rafael, mounted on a mustang, came galloping through the gate, and reined up his steed in front of his astonished father.

“My father! Great news; good news! I have just returned in *The Montezuma*. We have captured *The Cortes* and the transports.”

Don Miguel looked incredulous. This news, coming after the departure of the Indians, seemed too good to be true.

“It is true, my father,” said Rafael, proudly. “By noon to-day you will see them in the harbour. Now Don Hypolito has no fleet.”

“Hurrah!” cried Jack, tossing his hat in the air. “The luck of the opal!”

Those near repeated his exclamation. It swelled into a roar, and throughout Tlatonac only one cry could be heard, “Vive el opale.”

Chapter XXXII

Under The Opal Flag

Marching away; joyous and gay,
Rank upon rank with a splendid display,
Leaving the city at breaking of day.

Riding along, gallant and strong,
Round us the populace tearfully throng,
Greeting our going with patriot’s song.

Under our feet, flower-buds sweet;
Tread we in marching through plaza and street,
Never our kinsfolk again may we meet.

Laurels to earn; foemen to spurn;
Only for glory we anxiously yearn,
Conquerors all we will hither return.

“Juan,” said Dolores, seriously, “I believe the opal brought us bad fortune. While it was in the city, Janjalla fell, Don Francisco died, and all went wrong. Now it is lost, the Indians have departed, the fleet of Xuarez is destroyed, and everything promises well for the future.”

“That is true, in one sense, yet wrong in another,” replied Jack, smiling. “You must not forget that it was through the opal the Indians departed, and while it was in Tlatonac, *The Pizarro* was sunk, and the two other warships captured.”

“I suppose never again shall I behold the opal, Juanito?”

“Not unless you care to pay a second visit to Totatzine.”

Dolores shuddered. The memory of their peril in the hidden city was a painful one. Recent events had not obliterated the recollection of that terrible journey to the coast through the tropical forest.

“I would certainly not care about seeing Totatzine again, querido. And yet I would—if only to save Cocom!”

“It is impossible to save Cocom,” responded Jack, a trifle sadly. “The only way to do so would be to lead an army to the hidden city, and rescue him. But how can such a thing be done in that narrow, secret way? Our soldiers would be cut to pieces in those rocky defiles.”

“There is no other way, I suppose?”

“I am not sure, Dolores. That cañon road leads to the outer world. If we could only enter the valley where Totatzine is built by that way, we might succeed in capturing the city; but I am afraid such an entrance will never be discovered.”

“Ay di mi. Then poor Cocom is lost.”

“It is his own fault, querida. I tried to save him; but he refused to obey my orders. Still, there is one chance of aiding him, though I am afraid but a faint one.”

“And that, my Juan?”

“Listen, angelito! The sacrifice of the cycle does not take place for two months. I have escaped it, but Cocom may now be selected by Ixtlilxochitli as the victim. If we can crush Xuarez and finish the war within the next few weeks, it may be that we can march troops to the sacred city, and save his life.”

“But how can you get to the city? By the secret way?”

“No; by the cañon road. See, Dolores! I have an idea!”

They were sitting on the azotea, two days after the Indians had retreated from Tlatonac. Rafael had just left them, full of glee at the proposed expedition to Janjalla, and it was then that Dolores had made the remark about the opal which led to the conversation regarding Cocom, Totatzine, and the cañon road.

In her lap Dolores had a pile of flowers, which she was arranging for the use of the house. Jack took a handful of these, and, kneeling down on the floor of the azotea, proceeded to illustrate his theory by constructing a map with the blossoms.

“Behold, my own!” he said, deftly placing a bud here and there, “this rose is Totatzine, situate fifty miles from the coast in a straight line. Here is Tlatonac, indicated by this scarlet verbená. From the point where we embarked in the canoe to the capital is twenty miles.”

“I understand,” said Dolores, much interested in this explanation.

“From Totatzine to the point where we embarked, and from thence to Tlatonac, is what we call a right angle. Now, if I draw a straight line from the capital in a slanting direction, you can see that it passes through Totatzine.”

“I see that, querido! but the third line is longer than the other two.”

“It is longer than each of the other two lines if you take them separately. Shorter if you take them together. You do not know Euclid, Dolores, else you would discover that any two sides of a triangle are together greater than the third side.”

“Wait a moment, Juanito!” exclaimed Dolores, vivaciously. “From Totatzine to the point where we embarked is fifty miles, from thence to Tlatonac twenty miles—in all, seventy miles. But by your reasoning this third line is not seventy miles.”

“Of course not! Still I believe it is quite seventy miles from Tlatonac to Totatzine by this new way.”

“How so?”

“Because we cannot go thither in a straight line. If we went by this one I have drawn, the distance would be much shorter than by the secret way of the sea. But as we have to follow the railway it is a longer journey—quite seventy miles. See! This is Cuavaca, at the foot of Xicotencatl—thirty miles from Tlatonac; from Cuavaca to the terminus of the railway it is twenty miles; from thence to Totatzine possibly another twenty—in all seventy miles. So you see that the distance each way, owing to the configuration of the country, is precisely the same.”

“Yes; but what of that?”

“Can you not see? At the point where the railway stops it is only twenty miles to Totatzine. Now, if, as I suspect, there is a road leading up the cañon to the city, the distance from the termination of the railway works to that road cannot be very far. If, therefore, we discover the hidden road, we can take our troops up by rail, march the rest of the distance, and enter Totatzine through the mouth of the cañon.”

“Oh!” cried Dolores, astonished at this idea. “And you propose to attempt this entrance?”

“If it can be found. Unfortunately Cocom is the only Indian who could supply such information, and he is a prisoner to Ixtlilxochitli.”

“But if he knew of this cañon road, why did he not lead us by that way instead of towards the coast?”

“You forget the whole country is overrun by Indians. We could not have disguised ourselves as pilgrims had we gone by the cañon road. That is evidently the secular path. The other way to the coast is sacred.”

"It might be done, Juanito."

"Yes; but it cannot be done till Xuarez is conquered and the war is ended."

"Santissima!" sighed Dolores, sadly; "and when will that be?"

"Very shortly. Now we have succeeded in getting rid of the Indians, we shall be able to crush Xuarez at one blow."

"When do you march south?"

"To-morrow at the latest."

"Will Señor Felipe be back?"

"No, I am afraid not. In three days I expect the yacht will return. By that time who knows but what we may not have conquered the rebels?"

Shortly afterwards this conversation came to an abrupt conclusion as Don Miguel sent a special messenger to call Jack to the Palacio Nacional. In those days Jack was a very important personage. Maraquando was so impressed by the way in which the Indians had been dealt with that he entertained a higher opinion than ever of Duval's capabilities, and frequently appealed to him for advice. Nor did this create any jealousy, for the Cholocacans were now beginning to regard Duval as one of themselves. He was going to marry the niece of their President; he was the engineer who had constructed the railway; he was deeply interested in the future of the Republic; so it was generally supposed that when the war was at an end he would be naturalized, a citizen of Cholocaca, and take up his abode there altogether. A clever, brilliant young man like Jack was a distinct acquisition to the country, and the liberal-minded Cholocacans welcomed him accordingly.

From the deepest despair the city had passed into a state of great elation. With the death of Gomez, all the bad fortune of the Republic seemed to have vanished. Since Maraquando had seated himself in the Presidential chair, all had gone well, and the superstitious Tlatonacians looked upon him as a ruler likely to bring good fortune to the Republic. Nor was such a belief to be wondered at, seeing how suddenly the tide of fortune had turned within the last few days in favour of the governmental party.

The Indians had departed, and thus was Don Hypolito deprived at one swoop of half his power. *The Cortes* menaced by *The Columbus*, *The Iturbide* and the torpederas had surrendered, and now with the transports were lying in the harbour of the capital. Xuarez, by the loss of his fleet, was cut off completely from the north, and shut up in Janjalla with but six thousand troops.

After these events had transpired, the Junta met in the hall of the Palacio Nacional to map out the coming campaign. The whole of the members were on the side of Maraquando. Before the peril which threatened the Republic in the south all party differences had disappeared, and the representatives of the several provinces united in upholding the policy of Don Miguel. This judicious unity was the salvation of the Republic.

The capital was garrisoned by ten thousand troops plentifully supplied with cannon, ammunition, and rifles. This force was under the command of General Benito, who had been elevated to the command after the death of the ill-fated Gigedo at Janjalla. The troops were in a great state of excitement, as it was well known that they were no longer to be held back within the walls of the capital. Maraquando had decided to throw forward nine thousand men as far as Centeotl, and leaving one thousand to defend Tlatonac, try conclusions with the rebels in the open plains.

At the second conference of the Junta, this decision was somewhat modified by the advice of Benito. That astute commander pointed out that in Janjalla lay the strength of Xuarez. If he was defeated at Centeotl, he could fall back on the southern capital, whereas, if that was in the power of the Government, he would have no chance of retreat, and be thus crushed at one blow. The main thing, therefore, was to capture Janjalla, and deprive the rebels of this last refuge in case of defeat.

It was Rafael who supported the General, and proposed a plan by which the southern city could be taken.

“Señores,” cried Rafael, vehemently, “what General Benito says is true. We must leave Xuarez no refuge. He must be crushed between our armies in the north and south. Behold, Señores, in the harbour of our city lie two warships taken from the enemy, now manned by faithful sailors of the Junta. Also the armed cruiser *Iturbide*, and the two torpedo-boats *Zuloaga* and *Montezuma*, one of which I have the honour of commanding. Give us, Señores, the order to steam south. Put two thousand troops on board of the transports. Then we will lie in the harbour of Janjalla, and bombard the town. As Don Hypolito has probably gone north with the bulk of his army to Centeotl, the town will be ill defended. In the end it must surrender, and then we can land our troops and push forward to gain the rear of the rebels. From the north, Señores, seven thousand men will march under the command of General Benito. Thus Xuarez will find himself between two armies, and be forced to surrender or submit to be cut to pieces. The rebels will be defeated and the war will be ended.”

This proposition commended itself to the Junta, and was ultimately adopted. At once the fleet, under the command of Captain Pedraza, was sent south, with instructions to bombard and capture Janjalla. Then to lead the troops and push forward to effect a conjunction with General Benito at Centeotl. The warships, the cruiser, torpederas, and transports, left the harbour of the capital that afternoon amid great excitement, and then the populace rolled from sea-gate to land-gate in order to witness the departure of the army for the south.

As yet *The Bohemian* had not returned from Truxillo, a delay which vexed Tim mightily, as he wanted to send the boat off again with fresh despatches. Besides, he knew that Philip would be annoyed at missing the battle which was to decide the fate of the war. When he had left for Truxillo, there had been no chance of the loyalists and rebels meeting in open battle; but of late events had developed so rapidly that it was impossible to delay matters further. The army was marching for Centeotl, and Philip was absent at Truxillo.

Only one person was pleased at this. Eulalia was afraid of losing her lover in what promised to be a terribly sanguinary affair, and was therefore pleased that he was out of danger. She had not the Spartan spirit of her cousin, who, though downcast at the prospect of being separated from Jack, yet bade him march forward with the army to conquer the rebels, and made no attempt to detain him by her side.

Two thousand infantry had embarked on board the transports for Janjalla, and now the army, consisting of five thousand foot and two thousand horse, left for the front by the Puerta de la Culebra. Maraquando was nominally Commander-in-Chief of the forces, but, his presence being required at Tlatonac, he left the conduct of the campaign to General Benito. The army of Janjalla, proceeding thither by sea, was commanded by Colonel Palo, and he was directed, when the southern city was captured, to march to Centeotl, and effect, if possible, a junction with the troops from the north. There were also forty field-guns, and a battery of gatlings, with a corps of engineers. Thus provided, the army of the Government deemed themselves invincible.

When they set out, Maraquando solemnly delivered to Benito the great standard of the opal, which had never before left the walls of the capital. Now, in all its splendour, it floated over the heads of the soldiers, a shining star, with its glitter of feather-work and jewels, leading them south to victory. With that standard the army could scarcely conceive that there was any chance of defeat.

All signs of the Indians had disappeared. There was no doubt that, obeying the opal, they had retired to the sacred city, and there delivered the recovered treasure to the high priest. Doubtless Ixtlilxochitli, still desirous of aiding Xuarez, would stir them up to war; but before they could again emerge from the forests, General Benito hoped to cut the army of Don Hypolito to pieces, reduce the south to order, and then marching north, defeat the savage forces under the walls of the capital. The great strength of the Republic lay in the fact that by strategy they had succeeded in isolating Xuarez in the south. Owing to the loss of his fleet, he could no longer depend upon help from Acauhtzin, and now that his Indian allies had deserted him, he was forced to meet the Royalist army with a comparatively small army.

On Monday afternoon the transports, filled with troops, and convoyed by the warships, left for Janjalla, and at dawn on Wednesday the army began to march out of the Puerta de la Culebra on its way to the south. Jack took a fond farewell of Dolores, and soothed her with promises of his speedy return. Don Miguel, with some members of the Junta, accompanied Benito some miles on his way, and then returned to the capital to wait the upshot of this bold attempt to end the war at a single blow.

From Tlatonac the army marched to Chichimec, which they found in ruins. Hardly a soul was left in the town, for those who survived the massacre had fled southward to Puebla de los Naranjos. It was true that there, also, they would find but ruins. This they did not know, as the telegraph-wires had been cut by the Indians, but as those savages were between Chichimec and the capital, the unfortunate townspeople were only able to escape southward.

Leaving Chichimec, Benito marched to Puebla de los Naranjos, and there found a considerable number of fugitives from the former city. He was informed that Centeotl still held out against the rebels, though Xuarez was besieging it hotly, and that Hermanita was untouched by either savage or rebel. This news was very comforting, and desirous of reaching that town by nightfall, the General pushed forward his troops by forced marches. By eight o'clock the army came in sight of Hermanita, and were joyfully greeted by its citizens, who threw open their gates to receive these whom they justly regarded as their deliverers. That night the troops occupied the town.

Centeotl was but twenty miles further on, and Benito was desirous of ascertaining the position of Xuarez before venturing to give battle. He sent out Indian spies, and these speedily brought reports as to the numerical strength of the rebels. It appeared that Xuarez had in all about seven thousand troops, as he had been joined by several of the smaller towns of the Republic. He had left but five hundred to garrison Janjalla, never for a moment dreaming that, guarded as was the town by *The Cortes*, it would be attacked by the loyalists from the sea. Now having lost his sole remaining warship, he could not help seeing that his position was desperate. By his spies, he learned that the army under Benito was camped at Hermanita, and that Janjalla was being bombarded by the fleet of the Junta.

At one time he thought of falling back on Janjalla, concentrating all his force within its walls, and holding out against the loyalists, until reinforced by his Indian allies. As yet he knew not that they had deserted him and withdrawn to their forests. Had he been aware of his isolated position, he might have come to terms with the Junta, but relying on the aid of the savages, and trusting to Ixtlilxochitli's promises, he felt confident that he would gain a victory. As Janjalla was being bombarded by the warships, he decided not to fall back there, as he would but expose his troops to a double danger: the land army of Benito and the bombs from the sea.

What he proposed to do was to meet Benito at Centeotl, defeat his army, and then either occupy that town, and hold out till his allies came south, or march north to effect a conjunction with them before the capital. As to Janjalla, he could do nothing to relieve it. It was absolutely necessary that he should keep his troops together, so as to meet the army of the Republic under Benito. Before Janjalla fell into the hands of the Junta, he hoped to conquer the land forces. It was all a chance, and he fully recognised that his position

was most perilous. The only hope he had of turning the tide of fortune in his favour was to be joined by the Indians from the north.

The warships had left Tlatonac on Monday afternoon, and General Benito, knowing the weak garrison at Janjalla, calculated that the city would succumb to the bombardment by Friday at the latest. It was now the morning of that day, and he determined to march his troops forward to meet the rebel army. From Janjalla, from Hermanita to Centeotl, it was but twenty miles each way; and assuming that Janjalla was captured, as there was every reason to believe, General Benito hoped that the two thousand troops from the south, and his own forces from the north would meet at Centeotl about the same time.

With this idea, he marched with his full strength to Centeotl, for now that the Indians had vanished, he had no fear of being attacked in the rear, and if forced to retreat, could fall back on Hermanita, that city being defended by its ordinary garrison. Don Hypolito, so as not to expose his troops to the double fire of town and plain, left the shelter of the walls, and occupied a low range of hillocks running at right angles from the city. Between him and Benito flowed the river broad and sluggish.

By noon the armies faced one another. At one o'clock the first shot was fired, and the battle of Centeotl began.

Chapter XXXIII

The Battle Of Centeotl

The squadrons move across the plain,
Beneath a rain
Of deadly missiles falling, falling.
Oh, could we gain
Those heights beyond, where guns are calling,
Of deeds appalling,
One to the other not in vain,
Then might we conquer in the fray,
And victors be e'er close of day.

The stream lying between the two armies was called the Rio Tardo, from its slow-flowing current, and emerging from the interior mountains, pursued its way in many windings to the sea. Centeotl was built on the left bank, so that the loyalists were unable to occupy the town without crossing the river, and to do so they would have had to force a passage at the point of the sword. The battle took place about three miles from the city, on a large plain streaked here and there with low ranges of sandy hills, and intersected by the broad stream of the Rio Tardo.

On one of these ranges Don Hypolito had planted his artillery, and swept the river with his heavy guns. He also disposed his infantry along the banks, whence they kept up a regular fire of musketry on the loyalists. The bridge at Centeotl had been destroyed prior to the arrival of Benito, so that there was no way of crossing, save under fire from the foot soldiers, or in the teeth of the battery posted on the sandy ridges.

Behind this battery Xuarez held his cavalry in reserve, lest the loyalists should accomplish the passage of the river, and the combatants come to closer quarters. Between Centeotl and the position he had taken up, he placed a line of some thousand horse, with the object of preventing an attack by the besieged in his rear. In the disposition of his troops, he showed a wonderful skill in taking advantage of the capabilities of the ground, and General Benito saw plainly that it would be with considerable difficulty that he could effect a crossing of the Rio Tardo.

On his side there were no ranges of hills upon which he could post his artillery, or by which he could protect his men. Nothing but a desolate plain covered with brushwood incapable of offering the least shelter against the devastating fire of the insurgents. His only way of crossing the river was to silence the battery on the sandhills. With this object, he brought up his field-guns, and opened a heavy cannonade on the heights beyond. The rebels replied, and for over two hours this cross fire went on without intermission on either side. Benito trusted by this gunnery to deceive the insurgents as to his real purpose, which was to attempt a crossing with five hundred horse three miles further up the stream, near the ruins of the bridge. By doing so he could take Xuarez in the rear, and while the rebels were employed in facing this new danger from an unexpected quarter, hoped to cross the river with his full force.

Don Hypolito evidently suspected this stratagem, for he kept a sharp eye on the disposition of the loyalist army in the direction of Centeotl. When he saw a body of horse move citywards to effect a crossing, he at once sent a troop of cavalry to dispute the passage. Benito seeing this, despatched a battery of six gatlings to support his troops, trusting that under the cover of these guns playing on the enemy they could force the stream. At once Xuarez brought up his field-artillery, and in a short space of time the cannonading lower down the river was being repeated further up at the ruins of the bridge.

The right wing of the loyalist army, consisting entirely of infantry, was thrown forward in the direction of Centeotl, and kept up a fusillade, under cover of which the cavalry in scattered groups tried to cross. The insurgents, however, could not be dislodged from the opposite bank, and it was impossible to accomplish the passage under their persistent musketry. For close on three miles along the banks of the river this line of sharp-shooters extended, and at each end of the line artillery thundered incessantly. Men on either side were dropping every moment, and it seemed as though each army would annihilate the other without either crossing the stream. For four hours the battle had been raging without the combatants coming to close quarters, and Xuarez's soldiers remaining ever on the defensive, began to grow impatient. On the other hand, the Royalists trying to carry the passage of the stream by dash after dash, were warming up to their work.

It would have been madness for Don Hypolito to cross the stream, and with his few attack the many of the loyalists. The river was his great safeguard, and so long as that interposed its waters between him and the enemy, he felt comparatively safe, trusting to hold his position until the arrival of the Indians from the north, whom he counted upon taking the enemy in the rear. He saw plainly that his men were growing weary of remaining solely on the defensive, and submitting to be cut to pieces by the fire of Benito's artillery; but, until he saw a prospect of being reinforced by the Indians, he was powerless to do anything but stubbornly prevent the loyalists from fording the stream.

General Benito saw that the rebel leader was unaware of the disaffection of the allies, and relied on their arriving shortly to turn the tide of war in his favour. With a view, therefore, to dishearten him, he ordered an Indian scout, attached to his staff, to ford the river if possible, below the battery point, present himself to Xuarez as a deserter from the loyalists, and inform him that the Indians had retreated. The scout at once obeyed, and attempted to swim the river, but just as he was close on the opposite bank, a rifle-shot struck him, and it was with the greatest difficulty that he regained the shore. Several rebel soldiers ran up to finish him with their bayonets, but he implored them to take him to Xuarez, as he was in possession of certain facts relating to the allies.

On being brought into the presence of the rebel leader, he had just time to tell Don Hypolito of the uselessness of counting on the Indians, and shortly afterwards expired. Xuarez thought at first it was a device of the loyalists to gain time, but as hour after hour went on, and no Indians appeared, he began to believe that he was indeed foolish to depend upon help from that quarter. The full terror of his position came on him at once. He saw that, deserted by the Indians, cut off from Acauhtzin, the whole success of the rebellion against the Junta depended upon his cutting the army of Benito to pieces. Janjalla was behind him, and he several times thought of falling back on that town, but the knowledge that it was being

bombarded by the loyalist fleet withheld him from committing such a folly. Centeotl was held in the interests of the Junta. There was no chance of safety there, so he saw that he must remain in his present position, and either tire out Benito by holding his position stubbornly, or dash across the river with the main portion of his troops, and try the fortune of war in a hand-to-hand fight.

With characteristic boldness he decided on the latter of these alternatives, and sent forward a thousand cavalry to cross the river, and carry the war into the enemy's camp. Midway between the two batteries, which still kept up their fire, he brought fifteen field-guns to bear on the masses of infantry on the other bank, armed only with their rifles, hoping to cut them to pieces, and thus afford his cavalry a safe landing. Benito ordered five gatling guns to silence the field battery, and prevent, if possible, the landing of the insurgent cavalry. Unfortunately, his orders could not be accomplished smartly enough, and before the gatlings could be brought into position, the field-guns of Xuarez had opened a heavy fire on the infantry, under cover of which five hundred horse-men crossed the stream. The landing once effected, others followed, and the cavalry rode down the infantry like sheep, while right and left the balls from the field-guns of Xuarez cut passages in the crowded masses. For the moment the advantage was decidedly with Don Hypolito.

At once a thousand cavalry, held in reserve behind the battery, were hurled forward on the horsemen of the rebels. Five hundred had now crossed the stream, and there held the loyalists at bay while their comrades formed. The rebel regiment pierced like a wedge into the mass of infantry, and met the cavalry of Benito some distance from the bank of the river. What with these horsemen, and the incessant firing of the field-guns, the infantry of Benito were thoroughly demoralised, and flying in all directions. The cavalry of Xuarez, with admirable discipline, formed into lines as soon as they crossed the river, and steadily drove the horsemen of the loyalists backward.

Xuarez at once took advantage of this gain, and, behind his cavalry, sent regiment after regiment of infantry with orders to carry the battery of Benito by storm. In vain the foot-soldiers of the loyalists were hurled against the advancing mass of rebel horse and foot now marching steadily for the battery. They did not give way one inch. Xuarez hoped to capture the battery, turn the guns against the loyalists, and then bringing the rest of his troops across the stream.

This unexpected manœuvre had taken Benito by surprise, and there was but little doubt that if the battery were captured a panic would ensue amongst his own men, and thus give Xuarez a decided advantage. The columns of rebels pouring across the stream pierced the host of loyalists like a wedge and bore steadily down on the battery which was still under the heavy fire of the insurgent artillery posted on the sandhills.

Things looked black at that moment for the loyalist army, but at this critical juncture the troops of Benito succeeded in forcing the passage of the stream further up near the city. What the Opposidores had done in the centre of the line they did at its end, and, under cover of a heavy fire from their gatlings, managed to cross the stream and capture the field-guns of the enemy. These were at once utilised and turned on the rebels, and in a few minutes were pouring a deadly fire into the masses of cavalry and infantry sent to hold the bridge passage by Xuarez. An officer galloped post-haste to Benito, informing him of the crossing of the stream, and the General recognising that he might cut off the forces of Xuarez on the left bank, sent to the bridge all the soldiers he could spare, amounting to some fifteen hundred.

Meanwhile the cavalry of Xuarez, supported by several regiments of infantry, were trying to carry the battery of the loyalists by storm. Their own artillery was now silent, as so inextricably mingled were rebels and loyalists round the battery that it was impossible for the gunners of Xuarez to fire without cutting their own men to pieces. The rebels were still steadily pouring, column after column, across the stream in the rear of the cavalry, when suddenly their line was cut in two by the victorious loyalists from the bridge.

These had utterly beaten the rebels defending the passage, by turning their own guns on them, and now those latter were flying towards the centre of the scene of operations, followed by a scattered body of cavalry, cutting them down in all directions. The loyalist infantry quickly crossed the river, and followed in the rear of the horsemen, but, being on foot, were necessarily far behind. The rebels attempted to reform and reach the point where their columns were fording the stream but, flushed with victory, the cavalry of Benito passed clean through the mass, cutting off all further rebels from joining their comrades on the opposite shore.

At the same time, owing to the deadly fire of the loyalist battery, the invading soldiers of Xuarez were beginning to give way, and slowly fell back inch by inch towards the point where they had crossed. They were unable to get back, however, as the cavalry of Benito held them in check on the opposite bank, and seeing this, the General threw forward two regiments across the stream further up, where the bank, owing to the clean sweep made by his cavalry, was undefended.

The rebels now found themselves between two masses of their foes, between two fires, with nothing but the river between. They slowly retreated before the infantry, pressing forward from the direction of the battery, and falling back on the right bank of the river, found themselves unable to cross in the teeth of the loyalist cavalry holding the opposite bank, while the foot-soldiers behind fought viciously with the rebels. The cavalry and infantry of Xuarez thus caught became demoralized, and unable to keep a firm front to the loyalists, broke up into terrified masses, which were either cut to pieces, or forced into the stream, where they were shot down by their enemies on the opposite bank.

It was now close on six o'clock, and, after five hours' incessant fighting, the advantage was now with the army of the Junta. Benito held the passage of the bridge near Centeotl, and from thence down to the battery, the banks of the stream on both sides were held by his own men. The enemy beaten on the right bank, were slowly falling back on the left, and concentrating themselves round the hillocks, from which thundered their artillery. Behind the battery, Xuarez still held three thousand men in reserve, and these he brought forward, with the intention of hurling them in one last effort of despair, against the advancing masses of the loyalists.

General Benito no longer held back his army, but in person led his soldiers across the river. In a miraculously short space of time the combat was transferred from the right to the left bank of the Rio Tardo, and the whole force of the loyalists, with the exception of the corps of engineers attending to the battery, had crossed the river, and were pressing forward to carry the citadel of Xuarez by storm.

What with killed and wounded, and prisoners taken, the number of fighting men on either side was terribly reduced; yet, numerically speaking, the advantage lay with the loyalists, who could oppose seven thousand men to four thousand on the part of Xuarez. Confident in his position, and in the shelter afforded by the sandhills, Don Hypolito gathered his four thousand round the base of his batteries, and played his guns with deadly effect on the advancing masses of the loyalists over the heads of his own men. It was now a hand-to-hand struggle, and though the loyalists had the advantage over the rebels in numbers, yet as they were unable to bring their guns across the river, the combat was more or less equalised. The deadly fire from the sandhills played havoc with their ranks, and they were mowed down in hundreds. Having no artillery to oppose these guns, and being unable to silence them by the battery on the opposite bank, the only hope of thrashing the enemy lay in carrying the sandhills by storm. This Benito, with desperate courage, now proceeded to do.

As yet, Xuarez had managed to keep the loyalists in front, and gathering his lines from the river bank to some distance into the plain, desperately resisted the attempts of the attacking force to break through and storm the battery. To protect his rear from the river side, he sent two hundred cavalry to the back of the sandhills, to guard the stream lest any straggling parties of loyalists should cross at that point and assail

him unexpectedly. He was now entirely on the defensive, and, unless he succeeded in putting the loyalists to flight with his artillery, saw not how he could hope to win the victory.

How bitterly did he regret the desertion of the Indians, the cause of which disaffection he could not understand. With them coming from the north, he might have effected a conjunction by crossing the river as he had done, and thus captured the battery of Benito. As it was, however, his soldiers had been beaten back, the loyalists had crossed the river, and now his whole force was concentrated round the sandhills, upon which was placed his artillery.

In his despair, Don Hypolito longed for the darkness, in the hope that under cover of the night he might be enabled to fall back on Janjalla. Long since he would have done this but for the timely information that the town was blockaded by the warships of the Junta. It seemed like madness to retreat into such a death-trap, and yet if it could hold out against the bombardment until he arrived, he would at least have walls behind which to fight. He regretted intensely that he had not captured Centeotl and thrown himself therein to defend himself against the loyalists. Surrounded by stone walls, he could hope to wear out the troops of the Republic, and perhaps destroy them in detachments, but as it was he had no shelter. His whole front was being assaulted by the loyalists, and behind he had but his battery and a possible chance of falling back on Janjalla in the night-time.

The whole plain from Centeotl to the point of action was now in the hands of the loyalists, and seeing this the Jefe Politico of the city threw open the gates and sent forward men with provisions and wine to the wearied troops. Three hundred soldiers yet remained within the walls, and these also marched out to join the army of the Republic, and attack Xuarez in his last position. It was now past seven o'clock, and the darkness was rapidly coming on. Don Hypolito hoped that the loyalists would withdraw and renew the combat next day. In the interval, his men could rest and sustain themselves with food or fall back at once on Janjalla.

This respite, however, Benito declined to give. While the light lasted, he determined to keep up the fight, and if possible dislodge Xuarez from his position before the morning. Deeply did he regret that he had no electric lights, by the glare of which to conduct the battle; but as it was he took advantage of the clear twilight, and pushed forward his men vigorously in attempting to break down the stubborn line of defence offered by Don Hypolito.

It is questionable how long this state of things would have lasted, as the rebels obstinately fought on, and though Benito hurled column after column against them, not one inch would they yield. The artillery also, from the heights above, was sweeping down his rearward troops. He sent one thousand across the river again, to attempt the rear of the enemy, under cover of the fire of fifteen gatlings, but Xuarez turned four heavy guns on the passage of the river, and stopped the crossing with ease.

"Carrajo!" muttered Benito, shutting up his glass in a rage, "they will hold out till it is dark, and then we must stop. During the night they will fall back on Janjalla."

"And into the hands of our men!" replied Jack, who was standing beside the general. "No, Señor, Don Hypolito knows it is worse than useless to retreat from his present position. When the morning dawns, you will find him still on those hills."

"Bueno! All the same, Don Juan, I would like to finish him off to-night."

"Then send scouts from Centeotl to see if our men are advancing from Janjalla."

"It might be that the city is not taken."

“That is true. On the other hand, it might be that the city is.”

Coincidences occur in real life as well as in novels and here occurred a case in point. Tim, who had been to Centeotl to make inquiries, galloped up to Benito at this moment and saluted.

“General,” he said rapidly, “messengers have just arrived from Janjalla. The city is in the hands of the Junta, and our troops, to the number of two thousand, are pushing forward by forced marches.”

“Janjalla in our hands?” cried Benito, joyfully. “Then Xuarez has no refuge on which to fall back.”

The army shouted on hearing this cheering news, and looked upon the destruction of the rebels as a foregone conclusion, as indeed it was. Xuarez heard the shouting, and, becoming aware of the cause by the frequent cries of “Janjalla,” ground his teeth with rage, as he saw how fortune was against him.

“Señores,” he said to his officers, “we are condemned to stay here. There is now no hope of falling back on the seaport. We can but face the enemy, and fight bravely. I should have heard of this fall before, as my scouts are all over the country to Janjalla.”

Nevertheless, in spite of this discouraging news, he urged his men to fight bravely, hoping that the night would come, and force the loyalists to withdraw for some hours. In that time his army could rest and eat, while he himself might think of some plan by which to circumvent the tactics of General Benito. He was quite ignorant that two thousand men were marching from Janjalla to attack him in the rear.

The last glimmer of the sunset had long since died out of the sky, and it was now comparatively dark. As yet, the reinforcements from Janjalla had not arrived and Benito was almost on the point of ceasing the fight till dawn, when the moon arose in the west. Her appearance was welcomed by him with joy, for her light was quite brilliant enough to enable the assaulting party to continue fighting; and incessantly pressing on the wearied troops of Xuarez seemed the only chance of beating him from the sandhills and scattering his army. Don Hypolito cursed the moon audibly, for he saw that his last chance of escaping in the darkness was gone. Nothing remained for him but to fight on doggedly.

Then his scouts arrived, and he learned that in an hour two thousand men would attack him in the rear. With a cry of rage, he hurled his field-glass down the hill.

“Fortune is against me,” he muttered, biting his lip with wrath; “my star goes down in blood. Attacked front and rear, I cannot hold out much longer.”

Yet he was too brave to give in, and, seeing that the town of Centeotl was left defenceless, as its garrison had joined Benito, he hoped to make a detour, and throw himself with his remaining troops into the city. One thousand men he could leave to defend the battery and draw off the attention of the loyalists, and with his remaining two thousand march silently away to the south, then make a detour for the city. Then the reinforcements would come up in vain, for he and his men would have slipped away like an eel from between the two armies. He never thought of the fate of the thousand men he was leaving behind. But at that moment he would have given anything to gain time to reconstruct his plans, and would have sacrificed a million lives so that his campaign should not end in disaster.

This mad scheme to occupy Centeotl in the teeth of the enemy was destined to fail for lack of time. Before he could move a single column towards the city, the sound of distant firing was heard, and the reinforcements came up in the rear at a quick trot. The whole force of Xuarez was disposed along the front of the battery, protecting it from the assaults of Benito’s army. Undefended in the rear, save for two hundred cavalry guarding the river, it offered itself freely to the reinforcements for storming. Don Hypolito brought round troops rapidly from the front to oppose this new danger. The cavalry dashed

recklessly between the battery and the advancing infantry from Janjalla. Three guns, with depressed muzzles, rained down shot on the masses of infantry. It was all in vain. The fresh troops, elated by the fall of Janjalla, and the crossing of the river by General Benito, passed clean over the thin line of cavalry drawn up to beat them back. A mass of men obliterating man and horse, rolled upward towards the hastily formed lines of weary soldiers, brought round from the front to protect the rear. These succumbed in a few minutes, and the guns no longer being able to do damage by reason of the enemy being directly under their muzzles, the reinforcements swarmed up the slanting slope of the sandhills with cries of victory.

Benito heard those cries, and at once guessed that the troops from Janjalla were carrying the battery by storm. Hitherto he had been holding five hundred cavalry and two thousand infantry in reserve. These were now brought forward and hurled on the soldiers of Xuarez massed at the foot of the sandhills. The rebels looked in front, and saw this mass threatening to overwhelm them; they looked behind, and lo! over the brow of the sandhills poured a black crowd of men over whose heads floated the yellow standard of the Republic. The guns were silenced, the gunners bayoneted, and the red flag of Xuarez dragged from its pole at the top of the hill. Xuarez himself, surrounded by a ring of his officers, waved his sword for a moment, and then the wave of men passed over him. A cry spread throughout the host of rebels that he was lost. The men at the base of the sandhills, seeing the wave of men rolling downward, lost heart and broke up into scattered masses. On came the army of Benito, and between the two forces the insurgents crumpled up like paper.

In all directions they fled like sheep, and were chased for miles by the victorious Republicans. Benito, a merciful man, strove to restrain the zeal of his soldiers. It was all in vain, they were drunken with victory, and sabred and shot the wretched fugitives without mercy. The smoke hung heavily over the field of battle, and when it cleared away, the victorious troops of the Junta saw the great standard of the Republic floating proudly in the place lately occupied by the battery of the enemy.

Don Hypolito had disappeared, his army, broken to pieces, was flying in all directions. From the triumphant army massed round the sandhills, rose a roar of joy which made the earth tremble. The wind which had blown away the smoke, shook out the folds of the opal flag, and the Cholocacans saluted the invincible banner with cheers.

“Viva el opale! Viva el Republica!”

Chapter XXXIV

The Triumph Of The Republic

Mars, god of war,
Whom we abhor,
Hath doffed his helm,
And laid his lance and shield aside.
He will no more
Lay waste our store,
Nor overwhelm
Our lands beneath his crimson tide.

Mars, god of war, Peace comes anon,
Now war hath gone,
Her olive bough
Of gentleness and quiet she brings
Beneath her sway,
No deadly fray

Can fright us now;
From battle plains the harvest springs.

Three weeks after that memorable victory at Centeotl, the city of Tlatonac was holding high festival in honour of the triumphant Junta. Every street was illuminated and decorated with flowers. In the principal places, fireworks, so dear to the hearts of the Cholocacans were being let off, and the ships lying in the harbour were brilliant with lights. The populace in their gayest attire walked singing through the streets, visited the pulque shops, and gathered in groups to indulge in their national dances. Bands stationed in different squares, played the Opal Fandango, The March of Zuloaga, and soldiers, the heroes of the hour, were to be seen everywhere, being fêted and caressed by the grateful citizens.

Before the Palacio Nacional a dense crowd had collected, and the place itself, brilliantly lighted up, was occupied by a gaily dressed throng. His Excellency the President was giving a ball in honour of the establishment of peace. On one of the balconies Jack and Dolores were seated, watching the varied throng below, and talking of past events. For the hundredth time Dolores was asking Jack about the battle, and all that had taken place thereat.

“I am sure, Dolores, you must be wearied of this more than twice-told tale.”

“No, Juanito! It is a tale of which I never weary. Come, querido, tell me once more. Begin, ‘After the battle—’ ”

“After the battle,” repeated Jack, humouring her fancy. “Well, the first thing we did after the battle was to search for the body of Don Xuarez. He had been last seen on the summit of the sandhill by his battery. When the reinforcements took that position by storm, Xuarez vanished, and though we searched everywhere for his body, it could not be found.”

“So then you knew that he had escaped?”

“It was presumed so; but even now we are not certain as to what has become of him. However, he had vanished; and giving up the search for him, dead or alive, in despair, General Benito left a few hundred men to garrison Centeotl, and pushed on at once to Janjalla. In the harbour we found the fleet, which had captured the town by bombarding it, and Captain Pedraza, under instructions from Benito, took the ships back to Tlatonac.”

“Ah, I remember how joyful we were when they entered the harbour and announced the victory. Everyone in Tlatonac was mad with joy.”

“Dios! They are mad enough to-night,” said Jack, smiling, as he looked down on the crowd; “but under the circumstances, I think it is excusable. The fall of Acauhtzin, the last stronghold of the Opposidores, is worth being excited about. Did Rafael tell you all about it, Dolores?”

“Not so much as he might have done,” pouted Dolores, unfurling her fan; “but you see, Juan, there is Doña Carmencita—”

“Of course! Poor girl! Fancy her father being killed when the city was being bombarded!”

“A great loss, was it not?” sighed Dolores, her eyes filling with tears. “Ay di mi. How sad would I feel had I lost my dear uncle.”

“It is the fortune of war,” said Jack, calmly. “Instead of our troops capturing Acauhtzin and killing Tejada, it might have been Xuarez storming Tlatonac and shooting Don Miguel. One thing, at least, Doña

Carmencita has to be grateful for: Rafael rescued her unharmed from the burning city, and now she is to be his wife.”

“And I am to be yours!”

“Yes; and Eulalia is to be Philip’s,” finished Jack, promptly. “I thought Don Miguel would never give his consent to that marriage.”

“Eh, Juanito!” said Dolores, with a mischievous smile, “I think my uncle did so to console Don Felipe for losing his chance of being at the battle.”

“Poor Philip! Only one battle of any consequence, and he missed it by being away at Truxillo.”

At this moment Dolores was summoned away from her lover by Doña Serafina. The old lady was a very severe duenna when not asleep, and as Dolores was yet unmarried, did not approve of her being too much in the society of her future husband. A little jealousy was mingled with this strict regard for etiquette, as Doña Serafina had utterly failed to fascinate Peter. All her smiles and insinuating remarks had been quite thrown away on the little doctor, who showed no disposition for matrimony, and scrupulously ignored the languishing looks of his elderly admirer. Finally, Serafina gave up the pursuit of this medical male as a bad job, and revenged herself indirectly on the sex by being particularly sharp with Eulalia and Dolores, both of whom were rarely permitted to be more than a few minutes with their respective lovers. These last blamed Peter in no measured terms for thus depriving them of the society of their future wives; but the doctor absolutely refused to sacrifice himself any longer on the altar of friendship. He announced this in a conversation which took place in the patio of Casa Maraquando after the ball.

“I would do anything for you I could,” he explained plaintively to Jack and Philip; “but I really cannot go on paying attention to Doña Serafina. She thinks I am in earnest!”

“And so you ought to be, you little monster,” said Tim, quickly. “It’s time you were married.”

“Well, then, why don’t you set the example?”

“It’s easy talking! I have no one to love me.”

“Journalism is a jealous mistress,” observed Philip, laughing. “Tim is devoted to ‘Articles from a Special Correspondent.’ ”

“True for you,” replied Tim, complacently; “but my occupation’s gone. Didn’t I send my last article about ‘The Fall of Acauhtzin’ from Janjalla? and isn’t the war over?”

“The war is certainly over!” said Jack, lighting a cigarette; “but the danger of another war is not yet past.”

“What do you mean, Jack?”

“Don Hypolito still lives; and while he lives, the Republic is not safe.”

“Still lives!” echoed Philip, in surprise. “Why, Jack, I don’t see how you can make that out. He was not found on the field of battle, nor in Janjalla, nor in Acauhtzin. He must be dead!”

“No; Don Hypolito is not the man to die so easily. Where he is, I do not know, but I am certain he is yet alive.”

There was silence for a few minutes, as each was busy with his own thoughts regarding the probable resurrection of Xuarez. After the battle of Centeotl, he had vanished utterly from the face of the earth. It was thought he had fled to Janjalla, or perchance to Acauhtzin; but in neither of those towns could he be discovered. After a bombardment of five hours, the latter city had surrendered to the warships. Don Josè, the Governor, in the absence of Xuarez, had been killed by the bursting of a bomb, and many of his officers had shared the same fate. Of Xuarez, however, nothing could be discovered, and Don Miguel was much disturbed thereat. With a restless spirit like the rebel leader still working in secret, the danger was not yet at an end, and the President was determined to spare no effort to bring Xuarez, to justice. While the four friends were thinking over this matter, Don Rafael, who had been holding a private conversation with his father, entered the patio.

That young man was the hero of the bombardment of Acauhtzin. He had recovered Doña Carmencita; his father had consented to his speedy marriage with that lady, and he was idolised by his fellow-citizens. With all this good fortune, he should have been gay and lighthearted; but as he entered the patio, he certainly looked anything but happy.

“Dios! What ails you, Rafael?” asked Jack, as his friend threw himself into a seat, and sighed heavily. “Anything wrong?”

“Carambo! Everything is wrong. My father refuses his consent to our marriages.”

“What?” interrupted Philip and Jack, in dismay.

“Till Xuarez is discovered and punished,” finished Rafael, dismally.

“Ah!” said Philip, with a breath of relief, “it might have been worse. I thought you were about to say Don Miguel had refused his consent altogether.”

“Dios! I don’t know if it does not amount to that,” replied Rafael, shrugging his shoulders. “How are we to find this ladron of a Xuarez? He is not at Acauhtzin. He is not in the south. Where then are we to look for him?”

“Can you not find out?—”

“I can find out nothing, mi amigo. For my part, I believe he is dead.”

“For my part, Señor Rafael, I believe he is alive,” retorted Tim, gruffly.

“Eh! And where do you think he is to be found, Señor Correspoñsal?”

“Quien sabe,” said Tim, carelessly. “But you know, Señor, that after the battle of Centeotl, I rode to Janjalla, to wire my report to England?”

“Yes.”

“While there, I heard two prisoners talking. They, deeming me to be a foreigner, and not knowing that I was conversant with Spanish, spoke freely.”

“Bueno! And they said?—”

“Nothing about Don Hypolito, but talked of Pepe.”

“Pepe!” echoed Philip, quickly. “The zambo who decoyed Dolores from Tlatonac—the lover of Marina?”

“The same. Pepe, it appears, had followed Xuarez to Janjalla, being, as we know, the prince of spies. When *The Cortes* was taken, and Xuarez was thus cut off from getting back to Acauhtzin, Pepe happened to be in Janjalla. The troops of Xuarez were wondering, in the case of defeat, how they could escape from the hands of our men. Pepe laughed, on hearing their doubts, and said he could easily escape to Totatzine.”

“To Totatzine?”

“To the sacred city. He said no one could follow him there, and that he knew of a secret way in the south, which would take him thither.”

“But, Jack, the secret way you came is to the north of Tlatonac,” said Philip turning towards Duval.

“Very true! But for a long time I have had my suspicions that there is a second way to that city, by the cañon road, of which I told you. It is by that way, to my mind, that Pepe intended to go.”

“Yes, mi amigo!” said Rafael, triumphantly; “but you quite forget. Pepe was captured in the south, after the battle of Centeotl, and is now in prison at Tlatonac, awaiting punishment.”

“Very true! He did not escape to Totatzine, as he intended. But where was he captured? At the battle of Centeotl. Now, seeing that Don Hypolito has disappeared, it is just possible that Pepe told him of the second secret way to the sacred city, and that Xuarez may have escaped thence.”

“Dios!” exclaimed Rafael, springing to his feet. “Think you, Señor Correspoñsal, that this dog is now at Totatzine?”

“I am not sure, but it might be so. Ixtlilxochitli is his friend. There he would be safe, and if at the battle of Centeotl Pepe told him of this southern way to the city, when he saw that all was lost, he probably took advantage of the information.”

“Why not find out if this is so, from Pepe?” suggested Jack, when Tim ceased speaking.

“He will tell nothing,” replied Rafael, in disgust. “This zambo is a mule for obstinacy.”

“We might try, at all events,” said Philip, cheerfully. “Where is Pepe, mi amigo?”

“In the prison of the Palacio Nacional. If you think, Señores, there is any chance of getting information from the zambo, let us seek him now.”

“Why to-night?” said Peter, looking at his watch, “or rather this morning. It is two o’clock. You are all weary with the ball. Better wait till to-morrow.”

“No!” exclaimed Rafael, throwing his heavy cloak over his shoulder. “We will go now. My father absolutely refuses to let any of us marry until we discover Xuarez. I want to know where he is to be found at once, otherwise I shall get no rest. As for you, señor—”

“I will come, by all means,” said Philip, putting on his sombrero. “It is also to my interest to find Xuarez, else I may not marry your sister, Rafael.”

“We will all go!” said Jack, rising to his feet. “Tim, you may get some copy, and make an article of it— ‘The Confessions of a Spy.’ Peter, you can go to bed, as this matter does not interest you in the least.”

“Oh, doesn’t it?” said Peter, indignantly. “I am as anxious as you are to see you married, Jack. But with your permission, I shall go to bed, because I do not think you’ll get any information out of Pepe.”

“We’ll try, at all events,” observed Philip, emphatically. “I want to marry Eulalia.”

“And I,” said Juan, following his friends to the door, “want to do three things, none of which I can accomplish unless Pepe tells us of the secret way.”

“And the three things, Jack?” asked Tim, curiously.

“First, I want to marry Dolores. Second, I desire to save the life of Cocom, who is a prisoner at Totatzine; and, third, I am anxious to obtain possession again of the harlequin opal.”

Chapter XXXV

The Cañon Road

This is a tropical forest,
Where myriad leaves forming a roof overhead, keep out the
 effulgence of sunlight,
So that beneath is the region of shadows and dimness;
Yet in this spectral twilight rise cities, magnificent, lonely;
Built in the far-distant days of giants—great architects they!
Sky-piercing pyramids, plinth, and column, and capital.
Line upon line of pillars, that loom in the darkness eternal,
Staircases huge, vast halls, and temples majestic;
Now no longer receiving the throngs of worshippers holy,
Only the bat flits through the ruins; ravenous beasts now wander
Through street, and square, and palaces gorgeous.
Who built all these splendours? We know not who built them.
Yet do they loom in the twilight region of shadows,
Encircled by tropical forests.

As a rule, Dr. Grench was an early riser, and denied himself the luxurious idleness of morning slumbers, but on this special occasion he did not wake at his usual hour. The dancing of the previous night had proved too much for the virtuous Peter, who always went to bed early, consequently he was very tired, and by no means pleased at being awakened unexpectedly by Jack. Peter was in the middle of a delightful dream, in which he was hunting unusually large beetles. After a time, however, the beetles began to hunt Peter, and one, having caught him, was shaking him severely. The shaking woke him up, and the beetle changed to Jack, who was trying to pull Peter out of bed.

“What’s matter?” grumbled Peter vaguely, struggling into a sitting position. “I don’t want to get up.”

“You must,” said Jack, serenely, “or we shall start without you.”

“Start? what? where? when? Beetle-hunting?”

“Peter, you are not awake! What do you mean by such delirious talk? Put on your clothes, and come down to breakfast. We’re all waiting.”

Jack vanished, and Peter, wondering what was the matter, got out of bed with manifest reluctance. A cold bath drove the fumes of sleep from his head, and dressing rapidly, he repaired to the dining-room, where he found his friends and Rafael making a hasty meal. Peter stared, and began to ask questions.

“Now what is—?”

“Oh, here’s Peter,” said Philip, looking up with a smile. “Come on, sluggard, and have something to eat. We are going to Cuavaca by train.”

“Train!” repeated the doctor, taking his seat. “What train?”

“Jack’s train, you idiot,” said Tim, giving Peter a dig in the ribs. “Your wits are wandering!”

“I think yours must be,” retorted Peter, addressing the company collectively. “What is the meaning of this early rising?”

“We are going to Cuavaca.”

“Never heard of it.”

“Then you hear of it now,” said Jack, crossly; “how stupid you are, Peter. I will explain: we saw Pepe, the zambo, last night, and on condition that his life is spared, he has promised to guide us to the city of Totatzine by this second secret way.”

“Oh! and Cuavaca?”

“Cuavaca is a town thirty miles inland. The railway line is laid down to that place, and twenty miles beyond. We are taking a thousand troops to Cuavaca, and intend to leave them there, while Pepe shows us the cañon road. Then we will lead them by that way to Totatzine, save Cocom, take Xuarez prisoner, and secure the opal.”

“But,” said Peter, argumentatively, “is the end of your railway near this hidden city? or does a trackless forest lie between the terminus and the cañon road?”

Jack made a diagram on the tablecloth with knives and plates.

“Look, Peter! This is Tlatonac. This Cuavaca. We go to the latter place by rail. From Cuavaca the railway is constructed another twenty miles, and stops in the middle of a vast forest. Here, according to Pepe, is Totatzine, sunken out of sight in its hollow valley. Between the end of the railway and Totatzine is a distance of twenty miles, more or less—”

“Of tangled forest and brushwood!”

“Nothing of the sort. Don’t I tell you Pepe has promised to show us the secret way—the other secret way? The entrance is from a ruined city, about a mile to the right of the railway works. We find out that city, take our men from Cuavaca to it, and thence march up the cañon road to Totatzine.”

“Dios! Don Juan!” exclaimed Rafael, who had been looking at Jack’s table-map. “It seems to me that if the railway goes on it will pass by and reveal this hidden city.”

“Not it. Had there been a chance of its doing so, we would have had trouble with the Indians pulling up the rails. No, mi amigo. The line is surveyed a long distance further on. If it turned to the right, it might

certainly hit Totatzine; but, as you see, it trends to the left, and if used for a century could never reveal the existence of the sacred city. Ixtlilxochitli saw that, and did not mind the railway passing, so to speak, by his door. The city is too well hidden by its encircling mountains and by the windings of the cañon to be discovered without special exploration."

"But it seems to me awfully stupid that the priests should take so much trouble over the one secret way and never bother about the other."

This observation of Philip's seemed to strike Jack, and he reflected a few moments before he replied.

"What you say is very true, Philip," he replied slowly; "the secret way leading to the sea is very complicated, and even then the priests always blindfold pilgrims on the platform. This other road, leading from the ruined city, must be blocked up by rubbish, and what not. There is a wall across the entrance to the cañon, but it is pierced by a gate always open. No one comes by the narrow track, so I expect the entrance to that road has been choked up, and the way fallen into disuse."

"Then how did Pepe find it out?"

"Lord knows! But the secret must be his alone else the priests would have destroyed the cañon path leading to the pierced wall, and so cut off communication entirely from that side of the town."

"I hope Pepe is not leading us into an ambush," said Peter, anxiously, as they arose to go.

"If he does, it will cost him his life," replied Philip, grimly. "Pepe, my dear doctor, marches before us with a pistol at his head. The first signs of treachery, and he falls dead. I don't think he'll risk that catastrophe."

By this time Peter had concluded his breakfast, and they all set out to the Puerta de la Culebra, near which, beyond the walls, was the railway station. On the previous night Pepe, under promise of his life being spared, had admitted that Don Hypolito had fled northward overland to Totatzine, gaining the city by the inland secret way. This road Pepe promised to reveal on condition that the President spared his life. Next morning, Rafael told his father of the offer, and, as Don Miguel was anxious to capture Xuarez, he readily assented to the proposition of the zambo.

Of course the six thousand Indians, who had been disbanded by the influence of the opal, were not in the sacred city. Their villages were far to the north, near Acauhtzin, and as they only came south to the festivals of the opal, by the secret way of the sea, it was unlikely that the troops led by Rafael and Jack would encounter any resistance. The forests where the railway ended, and where, according to Pepe, the cañon road began, were singularly devoid of population. This might have been caused by the jealousy of the priests, lest some wandering Indians should find the entrance to the cañon road from the ruined city. If so, this jealous suspicion caused their ruin; for, had the district been infested with Indians, they, seeing an unusual concourse of soldiers at Cuavaca, would at once have warned the priests of the intended invasion of Totatzine. Then the cañon road could have been easily defended against the troops from Tlatonac by a small body of defenders, and the disaster averted. As it was, however, the inhabitants of the sacred city were entirely ignorant of their danger until the foe was under their walls.

The railway line was completed as far as Cuavaca, a little inland village which promised to shortly develop into a city, owing to its being the future starting place, whence lines were to run north and south throughout the whole length of Cholocaca. From the capital to this terminus extended a vast plain for over thirty miles, so that there was no difficulty in laying the line, and it had been speedily completed under the vigorous superintendence of Jack. There were no engineering difficulties to be overcome, and the railway ran easily in a straight line over the plains to the foot of the volcano Xicotencatl, where Cuavaca was situated. From this point began a rugged and mountainous country, which extended northward as far as

Acauhtzin. Twenty miles of railway had been constructed with great difficulty, as, owing to the configuration of the country, the line was singularly curving and irregular. Bridges had to be built across cañons, tunnels had to be pierced through solid rock, and embankments, faced with stone walls, constructed where the ground fell away rapidly to moderately sized plains. The district was situated in the tierra templada, about ten thousand feet above sea level; but, the grade constantly ascending as the iron road went northward, it was calculated by Jack that the last portion of the way would run some short distance below the snow line of the tierra fría.

This expedition to capture Totatzine was not without its dangers. It was the season of festival and the sacred city would doubtless be filled with fanatical worshippers, who would fiercely resist the attempted seizure of their shrines. A thousand well-armed infantry were sent to Cuavaca by Don Miguel, and, leaving these quartered in the village, Jack, with his three friends and Rafael, guided by Pepe, went forward to search for the secret entrance. When this was found, they intended to return and take the troops by railway twenty miles, and thence lead them by the secret entrance up the cañon road. When this was done, a reinforcement of another thousand soldiers was to arrive at Cuavaca, and await instructions there, lest the first should fail to capture the city. The engines running on the line from Cuavaca were singularly powerful machines, strongly built, so as to ascend the gradient to the northward, and there were plenty of trucks in which troops could be taken to the end of the railway. Jack also had a few carriages shifted from the Cuavaca line to that running northward, so that the whole body of soldiers now stationed at the little town could be conveyed to the hoped-for entrance of the cañon road in a remarkably short space of time.

By noon all the troops were quartered at Cuavaca, and then Jack started by the northern line for the cañon road. He only took an engine with one carriage, so as to travel as rapidly as possible. At first he wanted to go forward himself with Pepe, but Philip would in no way consent to his doing this.

“You can’t trust that zambo, Jack,” he said, decisively; “he might take advantage of your being alone, and knock you on the head.”

“Scarcely, when I am armed and he is not. If only we two go, we can travel on the engine. If you all come, I must fix on a carriage.”

“Well, that won’t make much difference,” retorted Philip, quickly. “We are all keen on the business, and want to see how matters turn out. Tim, Peter, Rafael, and myself are all coming with you, Jack; so hitch on a carriage to your engine right away.”

This was accordingly done without further objection on the part of Duval, and they left Cuavaca about one o’clock, travelling rapidly so as to reach the terminus with as little delay as possible. According to Pepe, it would take some hours for them to discover the ruined city, and they did not expect to return before six o’clock. Then it would have to be decided whether they would take the troops on to the ruined city at once, or wait till the next day.

Cuavaca was situate at the base of the great volcano Xicotencatl, which reared its white peak high above the surrounding mountains. North and south stretched ranges from the central point with summits more or less covered with snow, and from Cuavaca began dense forests which clothed the slopes of these mighty hills. Leaving the village by the side towards the north, the engine with its solitary carriage ran through a moderately long tunnel piercing a high range of hills, which shot outward at right angles from the principal mountains. From thence it emerged on to a deep valley, and skirted the side of the hills in a winding track cut out of the solid rock. Jack was on board the engine with the driver, personally superintending the journey, and his three friends with Rafael were admiring the view from the windows of the carriage. Pepe, guarded by two soldiers, was seated at the end of the carriage, and looked anything but cheerful under such surveillance.

The scenery was truly wonderful. Sliding along the side of the mountains, those in the carriage looking out, saw not the line on which they were running, but looked down eight or nine hundred feet into the depths below. Sometimes the line was built of solid masonry clamped with iron, and it was anything but pleasant to think how the train was clinging like a fly to the perpendicular sides of the giant hills. Below swirled rapid torrents raging over black rocks, or flowing in broad streams between flat mud-banks. The engine would proceed along a level for some distance, then pant slowly up an ascending gradient; suddenly turning a sharp curve, she would shoot breathlessly down a decline on to a long narrow bridge thrown across a wide expanse of river bed intersected by thin streams, which at time of rain joined their forces into one vast flood. Owing to the infinite windings of the line, it was built on the narrow gauge system, so as to permit the quick turning of curves, and when the engine, leaning to one side, shot round these turnings, the sensation was anything but pleasant.

“It’s a most wonderful line, so far as engineering goes,” said Philip, drawing back from the window with a sudden qualm, as the carriage rocked dangerously; “but it is devilishly unpleasant. If we went over!”

“There wouldn’t be much of us left,” said Tim grimly. “Begad, Philip, I’ve been in a mighty lot of railway trains, but this line of Jack’s beats Banagher, and Banagher beats the devil.”

“Santissima!” said Rafael, uneasily, “I trust, Señores this devil of an engine will not fall over the cliff.”

“I’d never travel on this line for pleasure,” cried Peter, who was seated on the opposite side to the precipice for safety; “nor do I think it will be much patronised by people when opened.”

“The sea for me,” remarked Philip, thankfully; “anything but being boxed up in this place, with a chance of falling five or six thousand feet without hope of getting out of the carriage.”

In truth the journey was singularly unpleasant in many places. Jack had constructed his line thoroughly well; but there was no denying that the sudden turns, the unexpected descents, the narrow bridges, and the frequent tunnels, were enough to shake the nerves of the strongest man. On all sides arose the snow-clad peaks, far below ran rivers, spread forests, gaped cañons and between heaven and earth crawled the train, holding on to the sides of mountains. The colours and lights sweeping over the scenery were exquisite, the landscape below, above, was grand and impressive, but the four men in the carriage felt somewhat nervous at this tremendous journey. In ordinary cases, they were brave enough, and prepared for any emergency; but boxed up in this carriage they felt helpless should an accident occur. As to Jack, he was used to such travelling, and looked at his work with great pride.

At length the engine shot from a deep and narrow cutting into the depths of a broad-spreading forest, clothing a deep valley. Through its centre ran a torrent, and the line skirted this to the left, through dense woodland, towards the high peaks of a mountain in the far distance. Midway in this valley the engine slowed down, and ultimately stopped. Philip, looking out of the window, saw a wide clearing, with upturned soil, fallen trees, and here and there huts erected. It was the terminus of the railway; and, thankful to have arrived in safety, they all jumped out on to the sward with alacrity.

Beyond this clearing appeared a track cut through the forest, trending in the direction of the distant peaks, but the line stopped at the beginning of this avenue. Scattered rails, piles of sleepers, the abrupt termination of the line, showed that it went no further. Between this point and the unknown city of Totatzine intervened a distance of twenty miles. The little party, with their guns and revolvers all in order, stood looking around them at the unfinished line. Pepe, guarded by the two soldiers, was sullen and watchful.

“And where is Totatzine?” said Rafael, staring round this wilderness of trees.

Pepe pointed to the north-east, beyond the peaks.

“It is there, Señor. In the hollow of the hills.”

“And the buried city?”

“Bueno! I will show it to you, Señores.”

“One moment, Pepe,” said Jack, staying the zambo, as he turned off to the left, “how can you tell the way to this city from here?”

“Dios! Señor Americano, I escaped from Totatzine to this place four months ago. I was sent by Don Hypolito before the war to the priest Ixtlilxochitli, and he detained me in the city. I could not find the secret way to the sea, and one night went out through the wall on to the cañon road. It led me many miles along the side of the cliffs, then down a staircase into a forest; at length, Señores, it took me through a tunnel. I had to climb over some rubbish of stones and earth up another staircase, and found myself in a large city of ruins. Leaving that, I pushed through the forest to the left, and came upon this clearing, where I found the men of the Señor Americano at work. They took me to Tlatonac, and there I remained till I went to Acauhtzin with Marina, as the Señor knows.”

“Did you tell my men of your discovery of this way?” asked Jack, abruptly.

“No, Señor Americano. I feared the vengeance of the priests.”

“Was the railway at this point four months ago, Jack?” asked Philip, looking round at the clearing.

“Yes. There was a possibility of war, and I was just going to England to get you to come here. The works were left in the condition you now see them. If this zambo escaped, as he says, he could easily have reached Tlatonac from this point.”

“Bueno!” said Rafael, in a satisfied tone, “thus far his story is true. Let us go forward, amigos.”

Jack made a sign to Pepe, who at once proceeded to walk towards the woods on the left, guarded by the two soldiers. His escort was well armed, so the zambo did not try to escape, knowing that before he could run a few yards he would have a bullet in his skull. The rest of the party followed, keeping their revolvers handy, in case of a possible surprise from Indians. They saw none, however, as the forest was completely deserted by all humanity. Pepe pushed forward through the brushwood, and they followed. In case they should lose their way, they blazed the trees with the hatchets with which they had taken care to provide themselves. Jack was resolved not to trust the zambo too far.

For about a mile they proceeded through a comparatively well-defined track in a north-western direction, then suddenly turned so as to face the distant peaks some fifteen miles away. This new path gradually broadened out into a wide avenue, and at the end of three miles, buildings, and ruins of walls began to make their appearance in a scattered fashion. At length, at the conclusion of another mile, they entered a paved road, adorned on either side by statues of Aztec deities, similar to those on the platform facing the sea.

“I cannot believe that this city is unknown,” said Jack to Philip, as they marched on abreast behind Pepe and his guards.

“Why not? No one would suspect its existence from the railway clearing.”

“No, that is true! But occasionally there must be some tribes of Indians about here, and they would be sure to hit upon it. Between the clearing and the beginning of this broad road it is but four miles, and the tracks seemed pretty well defined—clear enough at all events, to guide anyone hither. Once in this avenue, and it is easy to strike the city—as now.”

They had emerged suddenly into a vast space, built over with mansions, palaces, temples, and mighty walls. A pyramid of earth, surmounted by a ruined teocalli, was placed in the centre of the city and the wide streets shot off from this omphalos in a similar way to those of Totatzine. In fact, on exploring the city thoroughly, Jack came to the conclusion that those who had built Totatzine had also constructed this place. The plan was precisely the same, and, judging from the massive buildings, the carved façades of the walls, the broad terraces, and the enormous flights of steps, it must have been a populous place of some importance.

“Judging from what we see, I think it must be a royal city,” said Philip, looking awestruck at these colossal works of the dead. “Here, perchance, the king had his seat, and the secret way was constructed from this place to the sacred city of Totatzine, where the god Huitzilopochtli had his shrine.”

“At all events, I have no doubt that this city is well known to the Indians of the present day,” replied Jack, decisively; “though doubtless the entrance to the cañon road, choked up by rubbish, has escaped their notice. Did they know of its existence, Ixtlilxochitli would have closed up the narrow track leading round the precipice into the interior wall.”

It was now between four and five o’clock, so they had not much time to lose if they desired to find the entrance before sunset. The engine, in charge of the driver, had been left in the clearing, Jack judging it would be quite safe there, as no Indians seemed to be in the vicinity. They had brought provisions with them, and if it was necessary, could camp out in the clearing till dawn, when they could go back to Cuavaca to bring the troops.

Pepe marched forward into the central square, and then led them towards the extreme end of the city. Here a surprise awaited them, for they found that the town was built against a vast cliff, some eighty or ninety feet in height. A lengthy temple, reached by a flight of steps, was cut out of the solid rock, with ranges of pillars massive in the design and architecture.

“Wonderful!” cried Philip, in amazement, as he surveyed the Cyclopean ruins; “these temples are like those of Petra. What great men must they have been who built such shrines! A great civilisation once flourished here, Jack.”

“Without doubt,” said Tim, who was much impressed by these grand remains; “these Toltecs, or whatever you call them, were greater than the Aztecs. Cortes, to my mind, found a vastly inferior civilisation than had been when these cities were built.”

“Carajo, Señor Correspoñsal!” cried Rafael, overhearing his remarks; “we have nothing like this in Tlatonac.”

“Nor are likely to have,” said Peter, dryly; “the Toltecs were greater builders than the Spaniards.”

Guided by Pepe, they entered into this rock-hewn temple, and found themselves in a vast hall. At the back of the shrine, now unoccupied by any idol, appeared a ruined archway choked up with rubbish. The explorers had taken the precaution of bringing torches with them, knowing there was a tunnel to be gone through. From this entrance, as Pepe informed them, it was fifteen miles to the hidden city of Totatzine. Lighting the torches, they climbed over the rubbish and fallen stones heaped in front of the archway, and

began to ascend an immense staircase. Jack and Philip went first of all, followed by Pepe and his guards, after whom came the three remaining members of the party.

Up this staircase they ascended, and, at length emerging into the light of day, found themselves on a vast plateau, thickly covered with forests. A well-paved road, still gently ascending, stretched through these woods into the infinite distance. It was overgrown with brushwood and giant trees; still they found no difficulty in getting along, owing to the admirable way in which the stone blocks had been laid. This road ran for five miles, and then suddenly disappeared down a shallow flight of steps, under a low archway. Here Pepe stopped, and pointed downward.

“These steps, Señor Americano,” he said, addressing Jack, “lead down for a quarter of a mile, then along a tunnel for three-quarters of a mile. It brings you out on to the bed of the torrent flowing through the cañon. The narrow path leads from its mouth for nine miles to the pierced wall. When there, you are just below the walls of Totatzine.”

Jack and his friends held a consultation as to the wisdom of proceeding further that night. The darkness was coming on, and it would be as well to get back to the clearing before the night. There they could camp out, and return to Cuavaca for the troops at dawn.

“For my part,” said Philip, quietly, “I do not think we need explore further on our own account. Pepe has spoken truly up to the present, and without doubt this tunnel leads to the torrent of the cañon and the narrow path, as he describes. Let us return to the clearing, go back to Cuavaca, and bring on the troops. They can camp in the ruined city to-morrow night, and next morning can march to Totatzine.”

The rest of the party agreed to this plan, and, leaving the shallow tunnel at the foot of the protecting range of the Totatzine mountains, they returned to the camp. Now that he had shown them the way, Pepe wanted to be set free; but this the whole party unanimously refused to do.

“No, no, my friend,” said Rafael, making himself the mouthpiece of the others, “you may warn the Indians we are coming. Till Totatzine be taken by our troops, you are a prisoner.”

Pepe was forced to abide by this decision, and composed himself to sleep in the clearing, watched vigilantly by his guards, who, knowing that his escape might bring the savages on them, kept a keen eye on his slumbers.

“To-morrow,” said Jack, as they turned in, “we will return to Cuavaca for the troops, and before nightfall they shall camp in the ruined city.”

Chapter XXXVI

The Destiny Of The Opal

The spirit of fire,
The sylph of the air,
The gnome of the earth,
The dangerous wave-dwelling fay;
All madly desire,
The opal-stone rare,
Which at its birth,
They gifted with rainbow hues gay.
Earth-gnome caressed it,
Sylph did enfold it,

Wave-nymph doth chain it,
In spite of the flame spirit's desire;
Two have possessed it,
Now doth one hold it,
Yet will he gain it,
The terrible spirit of fire.

There were many Indians in Cuavaca, and had these entertained any suspicion that there was a second secret way to the sacred city by the cañon road, they would have at once warned Ixtlilxochitli of the impending danger to the Chalchuih Tlatonac. As it was, however, they could not conceive the reason of the troops leaving Cuavaca for the interior of the country. From their wanderings in that district, they knew perfectly well that the line stopped suddenly in the midst of a dense forest, and there appeared to be no reason that soldiers should be sent thither. The generally received opinion among them was, that as the Indians of the north had been on the war-trail, these soldiers were sent up by the Government to punish such rebellion. With this idea, the peons of Cuavaca took no heed of the expedition, knowing that it would be impossible for civilised troops to discover their brethren in the vast forests among the rugged mountains.

Thus, when next day at noon the explorers returned to lead the soldiers to the buried city, none of the Indians suspected the truth. Indeed, the troops themselves were in absolute ignorance as to their destination, as Rafael, thinking the Indians of Cuavaca might learn too much, ordered the soldiers to blindly obey his orders, and not question as to where they were going. Thus he hoped to camp a thousand men that night within the streets of the ruined city, and surprise Totatzine by dawn, when the priests and the populace would be engaged in worshipping the opal. The wall towards the cañon would be quite undefended, as never within the memory of the priests had anyone come into this city from that direction. Ixtlilxochitli thought that the way was quite blocked up, and never for a moment deemed that his bitterest foes would capture the city from the cañon road.

All that day the trains went back and forward between Cuavaca and the clearing, taking troops into the interior of the country. So soon as they arrived at the railway terminus, they were marched off through the woods to the buried city, and there ordered to camp for the night, or at least till such time as their leaders chose to guide them forward. By sunset a thousand well-armed, well-disciplined troops were bestowed in the ruined city of the Toltecs, within fifteen miles of the opal shrine, and yet not a soul, save the leaders, knew that this was the case.

The troops having been brought thus far, Rafael, as leader of the expedition, held a council of war as to the advisability of remaining there for the night, or pushing on to the narrow path of the cañon so as to surprise the inhabitants of Totatzine by dawn. Jack and Tim were strongly in favour of marching at once, and as Philip afterwards came round to this opinion, Rafael almost made up his mind to move forward without delay.

"From here to the cañon torrent it is mostly tunnels," urged Jack, persuasively; "so whether we go by day or night it does not matter, as we must carry torches. We can easily march along that road on the plateau between the two tunnels, and when we enter the last one, can arrive at the bed of the torrent about midnight. Let us camp there with as many men as possible, and then march along the narrow path at the first glimpse of daylight. Thus we will be able to assemble on the platform under the pierced wall while the populace and priests are in the great square of the teocalli. They will be unprepared, and we can capture the city without almost a blow."

"But they will be equally unprepared during the day," said Rafael, with some hesitation, "so why not wait here till dawn?"

“They will not be unprepared during the day,” replied Jack, decisively, “that pierced wall has people on it occasionally. Sometimes they come out on to the platform overlooking the torrent. If these saw our soldiers coming two abreast along the narrow path they would give the alarm, and the defenders of the city could kill our advance guard and block up the road. Now, if we can get five or six hundred on to the platform by sunrise, they can keep the populace at bay until the rest of our men arrive, then the city will be easily taken.”

“Only two men can walk abreast on the path?” asked Philip, dubiously.

“As a matter of fact, three can walk abreast, but it is safer with two. The path is cut out of the side of the cañon, and is very dangerous. It must be attempted by daylight. Nine miles of narrow path in the dark would end in our losing our men. Besides, who knows but what that infernal Ixtlilxochitli, to make things quite safe, may not have destroyed portions of the path?”

“If he’s done that, there won’t be much chance of our taking the city,” said Tim, in disgust.

“True, Señor Correspoñsal,” replied Rafael, gravely; “all things considering, I think it will be best to take Don Juan’s advice, and march two or three hundred men to the torrent camping-ground to-night.”

This plan being adopted, the council broke up at once. It was decided that Jack and Rafael should push on with three hundred men guided by Pepe. These were to camp at the entrance of the tunnel where it led to the narrow path by the torrent. At dawn the remaining seven hundred men, under the leadership of Philip, Tim, and Captain Martez, should follow, and by the time they arrived at the torrent camping-ground, the advance troop would have reached the platform under the pierced wall, which they could hold till the reinforcements arrived. As a matter of fact, Jack and Rafael hoped to have the full strength of their men on the platform and in the city before the inhabitants took the alarm; but, in any event, three hundred could hold the narrow path entrance to the platform while the rear came up steadily. Having settled these important details, they all made a hearty meal, and, after bidding their friends an affectionate farewell, Jack and Rafael, with their little band, pushed forward.

The men now knew that their destination was Totatzine, and so many rumours were current in Cholocaca over the amount of treasure concealed in this sacred city that they were madly desirous of getting to the town. Without hesitation they followed Don Rafael and the Englishman up the grand staircase, from the entrance whence all rubbish had been cleared away. On arriving at the top, they saw the broad paved road stretching straight before them in the semi-darkness, and still keeping their torches lighted to guide them on their way, marched steadily along the five miles until they arrived at the foot of the great peaks. Here was the shallow tunnel, also choked up by rubbish. This was speedily cleared away by a hundred willing hands, and then the leaders making Pepe go down into the darkness between his guards, followed with their men. The zambo made no attempt to escape, as now seeing the power of the Junta, and knowing that his life was safe, he had quite gone over to the side of Don Hypolito’s enemies.

The staircase led downward into the bowels of the earth for over a quarter of a mile, then suddenly admitted them into a vast gallery through which the air blew keenly. Jack was unable to restrain his admiration at the mechanical skill which the Toltecs—if they had been the engineers—displayed in thus piercing these vast tunnels through the solid rock. The red glare of the torches showed them that the sides were cased in brick painted with images of the gods, and the path under their feet was smoothly paved with stonework, worn by the feet of countless generations. To accomplish such marvels, these long-dead nations must have possessed wonderful engineering capabilities, and employed thousands and thousands of slaves. The latter might have been taken in war, and forced to labour at these colossal works, but where the Toltecs learned engineering was more than Jack could discover.

The tunnel was only a mile long, and in a short space of time they emerged on to a vast natural platform at the very bottom of the cañon. To the left, looking from the tunnel, the great gap ended at the distance of a quarter of a mile, and through the opening they could see the flat extent of plains, and the distant pinnacles of mountains. On the right the cañon turned suddenly to one side, and they saw themselves shut in, so to speak, by vast rocky walls towering up to the height of some thousands of feet. The torrent gushed and raged a little distance below the natural terrace, and on one side of it arose a narrow flight of steps leading to the path which ended at the sacred city itself.

So difficult had been the way that it was now nearly midnight, so the wearied troops camped on the terrace, and made a meal as best they could. There was but little chance of their presence being discovered by any human being in that desolate cañon, but Rafael, judging it best to be on the safe side, forbade them to light fires. Fortunately the night was warm, every man possessed a zarape, and they slept in comparative comfort.

It was a critical period, as discovery by any wandering Indian meant death to the whole band in that narrow gulch; but, to Rafael's relief, the dawn broke showing not a human being to be in sight. They saw the narrow path winding like a thread along the rocks in the distance, and it looked a dangerous way to go. It was, however, the only way to the city, and once they arrived under the pierced wall, they could keep the path open for their reinforcements to follow.

Jack made the men eat a hearty meal before starting, and would liked to have made them drink hot coffee, but that there was a risk in lighting fires. At the first faint light of morning, which was about six o'clock, the men having finished their meal, looked to their rifles and ammunition, flung their zarapes round their shoulders, and prepared to ascend the narrow staircase.

Still keeping Pepe before all as guide, lest he should send them forward into some unknown danger, the two young men mounted to the path, and in the space of an hour the whole company were winding along two abreast. Below they looked down thousands of feet, above the cliffs arose stern and precipitous, but the path, though narrow, was well-made and safe, so, two by two, they marched forward in silence.

"In a couple of hours the rest of the troops will reach the torrent," said Jack to Rafael, as they walked along; "and by the time we gain the pierced wall, they will not be far behind."

"Once we are on the platform you speak of, I do not care, Juan," replied Rafael, grimly; "but I hope by all the saints the Indians will not see us before we can get off this path. They could cut us off with the greatest of ease."

"Never fear," said Duval, casting an anxious look at the sky, still cold and grey; "at sunrise they will all be in the great square worshipping the opal. Totatzine, you know, Rafael, is a sacred city, and it is death for any inhabitant to remain away from the morning sacrifice. That is how the priests keep their hold on the people."

"But the women?"

"They will be present also."

"It must be a large plaza," said Rafael, disbelievingly.

"Very large. Much larger than the Plaza de los Hombres Ilustres at Tlatonac."

"Dios! What clever people those Toltecs must have been."

As they proceeded, the cañon wound to right and left, shutting itself in at every curve with its own walls, so that they never saw more than a short distance before them. Jack feared lest the path should suddenly come to an end behind one of the curves; but as Pepe, who knew the way, marched boldly on, this did not seem possible. The grey sky began to flash crimson, and the stars to the eastward died out in the rosy hues of dawn. They could see the torrent far below like a white thread, and hear its voice, hoarse and incessant, rising upward. The serrated summits of the cañon rocks loomed black against the changing sky.

On, on, and on. The road never seemed to come to an end, but stretched ever before them narrow and perilous-looking, a hanging-way between heaven and earth.

"I hope to the Lord none of the men will grow dizzy, and fall over," said Jack, anxiously; "the path is so narrow, the depth so terrible."

"No fear of that, mi amigo," replied Rafael, cheerfully; "they are all too determined to get gold and silver in Totatzine to lose the chance of not arriving there. Believe me, Juan, they are as anxious as we are to get to the end of this infernal path. By the way, Martez and Señor Felipe must be on it by now, with their men."

Jack glanced at his watch.

"Yes; we have been over two hours now, marching. I expect Martez will press onward as quickly as possible, so as to join us without delay. Hullo!"

"What is the matter?"

"I saw a glimpse of green just now. We are nearly at the end of the journey."

The word passed along the narrow line of men, and they grasped their rifles tighter, with fierce joy at the thought that they would soon be in the heart of the golden city, so famous throughout Cholocaca. The path began to slope downward gently. It turned round a corner sharply, and lo! before them, Jack and his friend saw the sacred town, sparkling like a jewel, in the hollow of the green valley. A wall, glistening like silver, stretched along the whole front of the cañon, and before this was a broad stone platform, on which a thousand men could assemble with ease. Below was the torrent, and on this side of the rocks was a narrow path, ending abruptly in a precipice. Jack pointed out this latter to Rafael.

"Do you see that, my friend?" he said, slowly; "it leads from the secret entrance to the other path below the bridge, in the centre of the town. If you took that way, you would fall into the torrent, and be lost for ever."

"Dios!" said Rafael, awestruck, "what devils are these priests."

The platform and wall were absolutely deserted. The gates were wide open, and through the vast arch-way they could see into the streets of the town. A rosy flame, with yellow shafts, appeared behind the arid peaks of the east, and loud and shrill the invaders heard the sacred hymn, saluting the rising luminary. For centuries that song had not been heard by the white man—not since Montezuma's altars had ceased to smoke had civilised beings seen what they now saw. A vast pyramid in the centre of the city, crowned with a silver temple, and dotted at the summit with tiny figures invoking the gods. It was the last time that song would ever rise; the last time the sun would be saluted with bleeding victims and rolling incense; for the last stronghold of the Aztec deities was discovered. The waves of advancing civilisation were about to roll over this primeval city, and blot it and its fierce deities out for ever.

Silently, with anxious hearts, the little band turning the last corner of the path, stepped downward on to the platform. When Jack found himself there, he breathed a sigh of relief. Even though the Indians found them now, they could not stop them in their onward course. His men poured on to the platform, fell into line silently, and thus established a defence at the mouth of the narrow path, while their comrades rapidly came onward to their assistance. The city was as good as won. But Xuarez—

“We must take care that Don Hypolito does not escape, Señor,” said Rafael, anxiously, as the troops massed themselves under the pierced wall.

“Leave that to me, Rafael. I have an account to settle with Xuarez. He shall not escape me.”

“Shall we attack the city at once?”

“I think so. It will be as well to get inside the walls, lest we should be discovered and the gates closed. Leave fifty men on the platform, mi amigo, so as to hold it open for the reinforcements, then we can penetrate into the town.”

“Making for what point?”

“The great square. We must capture the bridges, and so hold the people who are now worshipping on one side of the city. They shall thus not be able to get their weapons.”

“The reinforcements will arrive shortly.”

“In about an hour, I fancy. I told Martez to march as rapidly as possible, and I have no doubt he is pushing on with all speed. Come, then, Rafael! Let us march into the city, and don’t forget to seize Xuarez and the opal! Also we must rescue Cocom.”

“What about Ixtlilxochitli?”

“Oh, throw him into the torrent,” said Jack, savagely; “he was going to offer me up to that infernal deity of his. I believe he is making a sacrifice now.”

“Perhaps it’s Xuarez.”

“I hope so! We will be spared the trouble of shooting him.”

By this time the full number of men had arrived on the terrace, and leaving fifty men to guard the path, Jack, in company with Rafael, pushed forward through the gate into the city. No sooner had they got inside, and were marching down the street leading to the principal bridge, than some women saw them. Thunderstruck at their appearance, these paused, and then began to yell loudly. Rafael sent forward some soldiers to seize them, but they disappeared, running in the direction of the great square.

“Carajo!” muttered Maraquando, savagely; “they will alarm the town. Forward, men! Keep close together. Señor Duval, take fifty men, and hold the lower bridge. I, with one hundred, will keep the middle one, and you, Señor Riconada, can hold the bridge near the wall with the rest of our forces. Thus we will be able to keep all the Indians in the square till the arrival of our friends.”

Jack and Riconada hastened to obey these orders and blockaded the three bridges. Scarcely had they established themselves when the serpent-skin drums on the summit of the teocalli began to roll out the alarm. Frantic with rage and astonishment, the worshippers streamed towards the three bridges so as to repel the daring foes. No one could understand how these invaders had entered the city, and Ixtlilxochitli

smitten with fear, called on the children of Huitzilopochtli to defend their god. The crowd pouring towards the bridges were driven back by the soldiers, and as they were without weapons, owing to having gone to the square for sacrificial purposes, they could do nothing. Ixtlilxochitli was equal to the occasion, and from some secret store produced shields and spears, bows and arrows, and swords of obsidian. The drums rolled, the trumpets shrilled, and the priests on the platform of the teocalli frantically invoked the god, while those whom they had aroused desperately attempted to force the bridges.

A feeling of superstitious terror was in the breasts of the Indians. These terrible white men, whom no obstacle seemed to hinder, had entered Totatzine as though by magic. How they had evaded the spies and overcome the difficulties of the secret way none knew, much less how they had discovered the passage. No one thought of the cañon road, not even Ixtlilxochitli, who never dreamed of danger from that quarter. All the inhabitants of Totatzine knew was that their worst foes were in the heart of their sacred city, and that, unless they drove them forth at once, the Shrine of the Opal would be lost for ever.

Flights of arrows fell round the soldiers holding the three bridges, and many were killed, as they had no shields with which to protect themselves. On the other hand, the round bucklers held up by the savages were no hindrance to the bullets of the invaders, and as the soldiers kept up a steady fire into the dense mass of worshippers, the ground was soon cumbered with the dead and dying.

Jack in vain looked for Xuarez, but could see no sign of him. On the summit of the teocalli he saw a vast crowd of priests crying on the war-god to defend his shrine, and thought for a moment, as the black mass parted, that a man was lying on the stone of sacrifice. But the next instant the throng closed together again, and he was forced to give his attention to the task of defending the causeway. His soul revolted against this butchery, and he ordered his soldiers to deal as gently as possible with the comparatively defenceless enemy. Nevertheless, he knew that the safety of himself and his friends depended on keeping the Indians blockaded until the reinforcements arrived, and was forced to massacre the crowds which hurled themselves with fanatical devotion against his men.

Owing to the depth of the torrent, there was no way of crossing it save by the bridges, and these being held by the invaders, it was impossible for the Indians to fight to any advantage. Wave after wave rolled across the narrow bridges, and midway were repelled by the incessant fire of the Tlatonacians. The spears and arrows of the Indians did deadly work, and the centre of the causeways were soon filled with corpses, white men and red men mingled promiscuously together. Jack saw plainly that the three bridges could be held by them for hours, yet wished from his soul that Martez and Philip would come up with the reinforcements, if only to put a stop to this wholesale massacre.

Thousands of Indians were pent up in the square of the sacrifice, all arrayed in festal robes of white with chaplets of flowers. These latter were now torn off and cast underfoot, the white garments were spotted with blood—the blood of their friends—and, frantic with rage, the multitude did all that valour could do to break through the handful of men holding the bridges. The drums were rolling their thunder incessantly, the trumpets shrieked like human beings, priests bellowed, the worshippers yelled, and constantly could be heard the ominous cracking of the rifles, as every shot carried death into the white mass heaving tumultuously in the square.

All at once a trumpet beyond the walls rang out clear and thin.

“Hurrah!” cried Jack, waving his sword, “the reinforcements at last.”

It was indeed the seven hundred men, who had arrived sooner than was expected. Martez, anxious to aid his leader as speedily as possible, had marched his men rapidly along the narrow path, and now they were steadily streaming through the gate, making for the several bridges where the fight seemed hottest. As the priests were shouting down encouragements to the people below, Rafael decided to attack the teocalli, and

stop this work. Once the shrine was taken, and it was possible the Indians might yield without further trouble, a thing he heartily desired, as, like Jack, he was weary of this massacre.

Tim and Martez stayed with Don Rafael, while Philip joined Jack, and Peter, who was quite war-like in appearance, went to the town bridge, where Riconada was fighting. At a given signal, all three bodies of soldiers commenced to converge towards a single point, that being the teocalli. The priests saw this manœuvre, and bellowed with fear. Many threw themselves down the steep sides of the pyramid, in vain offering themselves to the war-god in the hope that he would decree victory to their fellow-countrymen. The women in the square were shrieking wildly, and hurling stones, wrenched from the houses, at the soldiers as they pushed the mass of men steadily before them. From the summit of the pyramid a cloud of incense rolled heavenward, and Ixtlilxochitli, in the red robe of sacrifice, stepped forward to the verge of the steps, holding up the opal in order to encourage his people.

A yell arose from friend and foe alike as they saw the glint of the stone, and the Indians closed resolutely round the base of the teocalli in a vain attempt to prevent the enemy from taking it by storm. All their valour and self-sacrifice was in vain. The three compact bodies of men pushed forward, shoulder to shoulder, through the white mass, leaving behind three several streaks of red and yellow, the uniformed bodies of their fellow-countrymen. Ixtlilxochitli saw these rivers of fierce soldiery converge towards the staircase of the teocalli, and yelling aloud to Huitzilopochtli, flashed the opal incessantly in the sun.

“There is Xuarez!” panted Philip, in the ear of Jack, as they cut their way onward.

“Where?”

“By Ixtlilxochitli. That chap in red. He is bound. By Jove, Jack, I believe the old fiend meant to sacrifice him.”

“Pity he didn’t,” retorted Jack, grimly; “look out Philip. Ah, there is Tim. Hurrah, Tim! See which of us will reach the staircase first.”

Even in the midst of danger, Jack could not help joking, and Tim burst out laughing as he hurled his huge form by Rafael through the crowd.

All at once their mirth ended. At the foot of the teocalli they stumbled over a nude corpse with a ragged wound in the breast. It was the body of Cocom.

“He has been sacrificed,” cried Jack, fiercely. “Forward men! Avenge his death.”

The advancing troops cheered loudly, and pressed steadily on towards the great pyramid.

The soldiers in the other part of the city had set fire to the dwellings, and already the flames were rising heavenward. Mad with rage, the Indians fought on doggedly, but could do nothing against the discipline of regular troops; inch by inch they gave way before the line of steel pressed against their breasts. The invaders stepped over corpses on their way to the teocalli, and those lying on the ground not yet dead, twining their arms round the legs of their foes, strove to throw them. The noise was something deafening, and the whole square was one vast field of carnage.

Jack and Rafael, with their respective troops, reached the foot of the staircase at the same time, and began to climb up. The priests, frantic with terror, threw down huge stones, tore the tiles off the shrine, and hurled them viciously at their foes. The drum was still beating, the incense rolling, and high above the din could be heard the strident voice of the old high-priest calling on his gods.

“Jack! Rafael! keep your eye on Xuarez; he is free,” replied Philip, as they fought their way upward.

Such, indeed, was the case. Don Hypolito had managed to get his hands free, and was now struggling with Ixtlilxochitli. Why he did so, none of the Englishmen could make out, unless it was to kill the old man for trying to sacrifice him to Huitzilopochtli. The attendant priests closed round the struggling figures to help their head, and thus omitting to defend the teocalli, in a few moments the assailants were on the top.

Jack sprang up first on to the platform, closely followed by Tim. The crowd of priests rolled on either side, rolled over the sides of the pyramid, falling into the frantic mass below. Then they saw the design of Xuarez.

“Catch him Tim; he has the opal!”

Xuarez, with torn clothing and pale, blood-stained face, stood against the shrine with the opal flashing in one hand and a spear in the other. Jack dashed forward to seize him, and Xuarez, with a yell of rage, hurled the spear. In a second Tim had thrown himself between the weapon and Jack, receiving it full in his breast. He fell back with a cry into Philip’s arms, and Jack, mad with anger at his friend’s disaster, flung himself forward on Xuarez. The rebel leader dashed to one side, and threw himself over the smooth side of the pyramid, sliding downward on his back. Jack, with his revolver firmly grasped in his right hand, followed in the same way; but before he reached the ground a red mass shot rapidly past him.

“Ixtlilxochitli.”

The rebel leader, holding the opal on high, dashed through the crowd of Indians, who opened a path before the sacred gem, followed closely by the red figure of the high priest. Jack saw the idea Xuarez had in his head. He was making for the secret way under the bridge, hoping to escape to the mountains with his booty. At once he followed the flying figures, but the crowd closed around him, and he had much to do to protect himself. Martez saw his danger and sent a body of soldiers to his assistance. In a few minutes, he was safe on the bridge surrounded by his friends. Xuarez and Ixtlilxochitli had disappeared through the secret entrance.

Determined to revenge the wound of Tim and secure the opal, Jack would have followed, when he heard a hundred voices on the platform beyond the pierced wall shout out the name of Xuarez. Wondering the reason of this, he darted up the street, followed by a few troops, and on gaining the platform, looked over to where the soldiers were pointing.

On the rocky ledge below, he saw two men struggling for the possession of the opal. Xuarez, hotly pursued by the old priest, had taken the wrong turning below the bridge, and they were now reeling on the verge of destruction. Nearer and nearer they came to the brink, then Xuarez, evidently seeing he was lost, threw the harlequin opal into the torrent. The great gem described a curve in the air, flashed rainbow hues in the sunlight, then dropped sheer into the boiling torrent below—lost for ever to the world. In another second, Ixtlilxochitli had forced Xuarez over the ledge, and the two men, locked in one another’s arms, shared the fate of the gem.

Jack stood on the edge of the platform, looking in silent horror at the fate of the rebel leader, when he heard his name cried out loudly, and turned to see Peter hurrying towards him with a face of horror.

“Jack! Jack! Tim!”

“Tim!” echoed Jack, with a pang of fear, “is he wounded?”

“He is dead.”

Jack waited to hear no more, but, followed by Peter, raced back to the teocalli. With the fall of the shrine had fallen the city, and Jack, crossing the square untouched, ran up the staircase rapidly. There, on the summit, supported in Philip's arms, with Philip's tears dropping on his dead face, lay Tim, merry-hearted Tim, whom they all loved so truly.

"Oh, Tim!" cried Jack, with a burst of anguish, and fell on his knees beside the dead body.

Below the tumult continued, the incense still rolled upward; but the last sacrifice had taken place in the teocalli of Totatzine, and Tim was the victim.

Chapter XXXVII Farewell, Tlatonac

Let us sail eastward, where the sun
Slow rises o'er the crimson wave,
Our western toils at last are done,
And rest, for ever, rest we crave.

Oh, see the shore fades far away,
A dim spot in the distant blue,
And eastward breaks the coming day
Which bids our life-day dawn anew.

Old times are at an end,—our lives
Have had their share of sighs and tears;
Now, loyal friends, with loving wives,
We hopeful look to coming years.

A cheer arose from the crowd at the sea-gate, the warships dipped their flags in salutation, the guns thundered from the forts, and *The Bohemian* steamed slowly out of Tlatonac Harbour. At her mainmast fluttered the Union Jack, over her stern drooped the Opal flag, for the daughter and niece of His Excellency Don Miguel Maraquando were on board, on their way to England, with their husbands, Sir Philip Cassim and Jack Duval. That same day had they been married by Padre Ignatius, and were now departing for the honeymoon, therefore did the guns thunder, the people cheer, the flags dip.

Six weeks had elapsed since the fall of Totatzine, since the death of poor Tim, and many events had taken place during that interval. When the teocalli was captured and the priests slain, the Indians, deprived at one blow of gods and leaders, yielded in despair to their conquerors. Don Hypolito dead, Cocom sacrificed, the opal lost, nothing more could be obtained from the town, so Rafael withdrew his troops by the cañon road, and returned to announce to the Junta that they need no more fear the restless ambition of Xuarez.

Poor Tim's body was taken back to Tlatonac by his sorrowing friends. For a long time they could scarcely believe that he was dead. Tim, who was so light-hearted and full of spirits; but alas! there was no doubt that he had died almost instantaneously on the platform of the teocalli. The spear, thrown with vigorous hate by Xuarez, and intended for the breast of Jack, had dealt a fatal wound, and Tim had but time to grasp Philip's hand in faint farewell before he passed away. The three survivors were wild with grief at this loss, so cruel, so unexpected, and reverentially carried the body of their old schoolfellow to the capital for burial. In view of Tim's services during the war, and the regard entertained for him by the Cholocacans one and all, the Junta decreed a public funeral to the remains; so Tim's body, with much pomp, was consigned to the vaults of the cathedral, amid the firing of cannon, the knolling of bells.

It was some weeks before the three Englishmen could recover sufficiently from this cruel blow to attend to necessary matters. Now that the country was at peace, and Don Hypolito slain, the President gave his hearty consent to the marriages of Dolores, Eulalia, and Carmencita. The weddings were very quietly celebrated, as neither Jack nor Philip felt inclined for revelry now that Tim was dead; and, indeed, so many of the Tlatonacians had lost relatives in the late war, that public festivities would have been out of place. Therefore the weddings were celebrated by Padre Ignatius in a very quiet fashion, and afterwards Jack and Philip, with their respective brides, departed for England in *The Bohemian*, while Don Rafael and Carmencita went north to Acauhtzin in a warship.

It was Philip's intention to establish himself and Eulalia in his ancestral home in Kent, and live the useful life of a country gentleman, varied by occasional voyages in *The Bohemian*. He could not make up his mind to part with the yacht, nor did Eulalia wish him to do so, and having proved herself to be a capital sailor, she took as much interest in the boat as did Sir Philip himself. Eulalia, having been shut up all her life in Tlatonac, now showed a decided desire for rambling, so it seemed as though even marriage would not cure Philip of his gipsy proclivities. Still before such matters were decided upon, the baronet deemed it advisable to install his Spanish wife in the family mansion, and introduce Lady Cassim to the country people.

As to Jack and Dolores, they were only paying a flying visit to the old country for a few weeks, as Duval had finally made up his mind to settle in Tlatonac, and become a naturalized citizen of that city. The life suited him; he was married to a native lady of the place, and, moreover, the Junta had given him full control of all engineering works connected with the country; so Jack, with the full approval of Peter and Philip, thought he could not do better than establish himself in this new land. The country was rich in natural productions, in timber, ores, and precious stones, so when Jack's railways opened it up throughout the whole length, there was no doubt but that Cholocaca would become one of the most flourishing Republics of the Americas.

Owing to the severe lesson at Totatzine, it was anticipated that the Indians would be too cowed to give the Government further trouble, and this proved to be the case. The last stronghold of the old gods had fallen, and the sacred city, which had been the centre of incessant conspiracy against the Republic was quite broken up. With the vanishing of the opal, it lost its character of a sacred town, and now being thrown open to the world by the discovery of the secret paths, no longer possessed any mysterious charm for the Indians. With no centre, with no crafty priesthood, the power of the tribes, instead of being concentrated, became scattered, and there is no doubt that in the near future, when the country is a network of railways, that the savage tribes will vanish before the advancing flood of civilisation.

Peter did not come in *The Bohemian*, as he had accepted the invitation of a celebrated naturalist to visit him up Mexico way, and hunt beetles and butterflies in company. Faithless Peter, he refused to marry Doña Serafina, and fled the smiles of his elderly charmer, for the, to him, dearer delights of entomology. Baffled in one quarter, Doña Serafina was successful in another, for she turned her attention to Don Alfonso Cebrian, and succeeded, after some difficulty, in marrying the Intendente of Xicotencatl, who had for some years been a widower. Serafina found on marriage that she possessed a step-daughter, with whom she could not agree, but speedily settled her future by marrying her off to Captain Velez, who thus became the Intendente's son-in-law after all.

After leaving Tlatonac, the four people on board *The Bohemian* were talking of these things on deck, in the warm sunshine. It was the afternoon of a perfect day, and the yacht steamed merrily along towards the distant ocean. To the surprise of Philip and Jack, the ladies proved to be excellent sailors, and were quite fascinated with the yacht, much to the gratification of old Benker, who, for the first time in his crusty old life, approved of the existence of the female sex.

When they were tired roaming about and making inquiries about this, that, and the other thing, they settled down in comfortable deck-chairs to talk about the future with their respective husbands. Dolores and Jack were returning to Tlatonac shortly, so had but the same life to look forward to; but Eulalia was secretly dismayed at the prospect of being an English lady.

“Querido!” she said to Philip, looking at him over the top of her big black fan, “I cannot talk your tongue. And your English ladies! I hear they are so cold. And your climate. Oh, Felipe, I fear your climate.”

“Who told you all these nice things, Eulalia?” asked Philip, smiling.

“Don Pedro.”

“My dear girl, you must not believe what Peter says. He doesn’t know a thing, except what relates to beetles. You are learning to talk English very quickly, and as to the English ladies—they will all fall in love with you.”

“And the climate of England,” added Jack, wickedly, “is the best in the world.”

“No!” replied Philip, laughing, “I cannot conscientiously say that. But neither Eulalia nor myself will stay much in England. We shall travel.”

Eulalia clapped her hands with glee on hearing this delightful proposal, and Dolores settled the future course of such travelling.

“Wherever you may go, Señor Felipe,” she said smiling, “forget not that Juan and myself dwell in Tlatonac, and shall expect you both once a year.”

“More or less!” cried Jack, lazily. “Come in a year, Philip, and you will see how Cholocaca is going ahead. I will have that railway to Acauhtzin ready before you know where you are. All those little forest towns will soon be in communication with the outside world—”

“And Totatzine?”

“Ah, Totatzine has lost its mysterious charm of the unknown. I’ll turn it into a resort for invalids, or a Central American Monte Carlo. Where Huitzilopochtli was worshipped, future generations will adore the goddess of play.”

“At that rate, you will still have victims offered at the shrine,” said Philip, grimly; “but, after all, Jack, it was a pity we lost the opal.”

“Can it not be found again?” asked Dolores, who deeply regretted the vanished jewel.

Jack shook his head.

“I am afraid not. Xuarez threw it into the torrent. Heaven only knows in what profound depths it now lies. Perhaps it is best so. While it was on earth, it caused nothing but trouble, from the time it was in the possession of Montezuma, to the death of Xuarez.”

“Now it is lost, I suppose the superstition will die out!”

“Superstition dies hard. All kinds of legends will grow up about that famous gem. It will still be remembered for many years, the more especially as Tlatonac is still, and ever shall be, the City of the Opal.”

“And Dolores is still the guardian of the opal,” said Eulalia, pensively.

“A guardian of a stone that has now no existence,” replied Dolores, laughing; “but, after all, I had rather the jewel was lost than my Juan.”

“Ah, Dolores!” said Jack, with a sad smile, “had it not been for the Señor Correspoñsal, your Juan would have been lost.”

“Poor Tim,” muttered Philip, softly, turning away to conceal his emotion.

The tears sprang to Dolores’ eyes, and Eulalia was scarcely less affected. It seemed too terrible that they should all be so happy, when poor Tim, whom they loved so much, should be lying in the grave. The bitterest part of it was that the death had taken place just when the war was over. Tim had escaped the siege of Janjalla, the battle of Centeotl, only to fall in a skirmish at the obscure town of Totatzine. It was fate!

They remained silent for a few minutes, thinking of the dead man, and then Philip aroused himself with an effort.

“Come!” he said, with a smile. “We must not be melancholy on our wedding-day. Poor Tim himself would have been the last to countenance such folly. We can talk of other things. Of Rafael, for instance.”

“There is not much to talk about Rafael,” said his sister, lightly; “he is married to Doña Carmencita. He is now Governor of Acauhtzin, and when Cholocaca has a fleet, he shall be its almirante. I think Rafael is very fortunate, Felipe.”

“Not so fortunate as I am,” replied the baronet looking at her fondly.

“Nor as I!” cried Jack, slipping his arm round Dolores’ waist. “Ah, Philip, how many things have taken place since we sailed over these waters! Did I not tell you you would bring home a bride?”

“You did, and I half believed you. For once, you have prophesied correctly. I am grateful to you, Jack, for having led me to secure this prize. When you came back to England, I was settling down into a crusty old bachelor; but now you will find me a devoted husband—all through your coming to England.”

“Say, rather, all through the agreement we made at Bedford School, so many years ago. That boyish freak has brought us good fortune and charming wives.”

“Yet Peter is still a bachelor.”

“Oh, Peter will marry a beetle! I expect we shall see him in England shortly. For myself, I do not complain of Fate; nor does Dolores.”

Jack bent down tenderly, and kissed Dolores, which example seemed so good to Philip that he at once followed suit.

The sun was setting in the west, and the sky was one blaze of colours. Pale rose, tawny-yellow, and high above, the delicate blue of the departing day. The sky, the sea were all glittering with rainbow hues of

unexampled brilliancy. The yacht, leaving all this splendour behind, steamed steadily onward towards the coming night.

“It is like the Chalchuih Tlatonac,” said Dolores, pointing to the sunset.

“And we are leaving it behind,” replied Jack, taking her hand; “but I do not regret it, querida. If Fate has denied me the harlequin opal, she has given me a dearer and more precious gift—yourself.”

THE END

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