

# *The Azteck Opal*

RODRIGUES OTTOLENGUI

'Mr Mitchel,' began Mr Barnes, the detective, after exchanging greetings, 'I have called to see you upon a subject which I am sure will enlist your keenest interest, for several reasons. It relates to a magnificent jewel; it concerns your intimate friends; and it is a problem requiring the most analytical qualities of the mind in its solution.'

'Ah! Then you have solved it?' asked Mr Mitchel.

'I think so. You shall judge. I have today been called in to investigate one of the most singular cases that has fallen in my way. It is one in which the usual detective methods would be utterly valueless. The facts were presented to me, and the solution of the mystery could only be reached by analytical deduction.'

'That is to say, by using your brains?'

'Precisely! Now, you have admitted that you consider yourself more expert in this direction than the ordinary detective. I wish to place you for once in the position of a detective, and then see you prove your ability.'

'Early this morning I was summoned, by a messenger, to go aboard of the steam yacht *Idler*, which lay at anchor in the lower bay.'

'Why, the *Idler* belongs to my friend Mortimer Gray,' exclaimed Mr Mitchel.

'Yes!' replied Mr Barnes. 'I told you that your friends are interested. I went immediately with the man who had come to my office, and in due season I was aboard of the yacht. Mr Gray received me very politely, and took me to his private room adjoining the cabin. Here he explained to me that he had been off on a cruise for a few weeks, and was approaching the harbour last night, when, in accordance with his plans, a sumptuous dinner was served, as a sort of farewell feast, the party expecting to separate today.'

'What guests were on the yacht?'

'I will tell you everything in order, as the facts were presented to

me. Mr Gray enumerated the party as follows. Besides himself and his wife, there were his wife's sister, Mrs Eugene Cortlandt, and her husband, a Wall Street broker. Also, Mr Arthur Livingstone, and his sister, and a Mr Dennett Moore, a young man supposed to be devoting himself to Miss Livingstone.'

'That makes seven persons, three of whom are women. I ought to say, Mr Barnes, that, though Mr Gray is a club friend, I am not personally acquainted with his wife, nor with the others. So I have no advantage over you.'

'I will come at once to the curious incident which made my presence desirable. According to Mr Gray's story, the dinner had proceeded as far as the roast, when suddenly there was a slight shock as the yacht touched, and at the same time the lamps spluttered and then went out, leaving the room totally dark. A second later the vessel righted herself and sped on, so that before any panic ensued, it was evident to all that the danger had passed. The gentlemen begged the ladies to resume their seats, and remain quiet until the lamps were lighted; this, however, the attendants were unable to do, and they were ordered to bring fresh lamps. Thus there was almost total darkness for several minutes.'

'During which, I presume, the person who planned the affair readily consummated his design?'

'So you think that the whole series of events was pre-arranged? Be that as it may, something did happen in that dark room. The women had started from their seats when the yacht touched, and when they groped their way back in the darkness some of them found the wrong places, as was seen when the fresh lamps were brought. This was considered a good joke, and there was some laughter, which was suddenly checked by an exclamation from Mr Gray, who quickly asked his wife, 'Where is your opal?'

'Her opal?' asked Mr Mitchel, in tones which showed that his greatest interest was now aroused. 'Do you mean, Mr Barnes, that she was wearing the Azteck opal?'

'Oh! You know the gem?'

'I know nearly all gems of great value; but what of this one?'

'Mrs Gray and her sister, Mrs Cortlandt, had both donned *décolleté* costumes for this occasion, and Mrs Gray had worn this opal as a pendant to a thin gold chain which hung round her neck. At Mr Gray's question, all looked towards his wife, and it was noted that the

clasp was open, and the opal missing. Of course it was supposed that it had merely fallen to the floor, and a search was immediately instituted. But the opal could not be found.'

'That is certainly a very significant fact,' said Mr Mitchel. 'But was the search thorough?'

'I should say extremely thorough, when we consider it was not conducted by a detective, who is supposed to be an expert in such matters. Mr Gray described to me what was done, and he seems to have taken every precaution. He sent the attendants out of the salon, and he and his guests systematically examined every part of the room.'

'Except the place where the opal really was concealed, you mean.'

'With that exception, of course, since they did not find the jewel. Not satisfied with this search by lamplight, Mr Gray locked the salon, so that no one could enter it during the night, and another investigation was made in the morning.'

'The pockets of the seven persons present were not examined, I presume?'

'No! I asked Mr Gray why this had been omitted, and he said that it was an indignity which he could not possibly show to a guest. As you have asked this question, Mr Mitchel, it is only fair for me to tell you that when I spoke to Mr Gray on the subject he seemed very much confused. Nevertheless, however unwilling he may have been to search those of his guests who are innocent, he emphatically told me that if I had reasonable proof that any one present had purloined the opal, he wished that individual to be treated as any other thief, without regard to sex or social position.'

'One can scarcely blame him, because that opal was worth a fabulous sum. I have myself offered Gray twenty-five thousand dollars for it, which was refused. This opal is one of the eyes of an Azteck Idol, and if the other could be found, the two would be as interesting as any jewels in the world.'

'That is the story which I was asked to unravel,' continued Mr Barnes, 'and I must now relate to you what steps I have taken towards that end. It appears that, because of the loss of the jewels, no person has left the yacht, although no restraint was placed upon any one by Mr Gray. All knew, however, that he had sent for a detective, and it was natural that no one should offer to go until formally dismissed by the host. My plan, then, was to have a private interview with each of the seven persons who had been present at the dinner.'

‘Then you exempted the attendants from your suspicions?’

‘I did. There was but one way by which one of the servants could have stolen the opal, and this was prevented by Mr Gray. It was possible that the opal had fallen on the floor, and, though not found at night, a servant might have discovered and have appropriated it on the following morning, had he been able to enter the salon. But Mr Gray had locked the doors. No servant, however bold, would have been able to take the opal from the lady’s neck.’

‘I think your reasoning is good, and we will confine ourselves to the original seven.’

‘After my interview with Mr Gray, I asked to have Mrs Gray sent in to me. She came in, and at once I noted that she placed herself on the defensive. Women frequently adopt that manner with a detective. Her story was very brief. The main point was that she was aware of the theft before the lamps were relighted. In fact, she felt some one’s arms steal around her neck, and knew when the opal was taken. I asked why she had made no outcry, and whether she suspected any special person. To these questions she replied that she supposed it was merely a joke perpetrated in the darkness, and therefore had made no resistance. She would not name any one as suspected by her, but she was willing to tell me that the arms were bare, as she detected when they touched her neck. I must say here, that although Miss Livingstone’s dress was not cut low in the neck, it was, practically, sleeveless; and Mrs Cortlandt’s dress had no sleeves at all. One other significant statement made by this lady was that her husband had mentioned to her your offer of twenty-five thousand dollars for the opal, and had urged her to permit him to sell it, but she had refused.’

‘So! It was Madam that would not sell. The plot thickens!’

‘You will observe, of course, the point about the naked arms of the thief. I therefore sent for Mrs Cortlandt next. She had a curious story to tell. Unlike her sister, she was quite willing to express her suspicions. Indeed, she plainly intimated that she supposed that Mr Gray himself had taken the jewel. I will endeavour to repeat her words:

“‘Mr Barnes,” said she, “the affair is very simple. Gray is a miserable old skinflint. A Mr Mitchel, a crank who collects gems, offered to buy that opal, and he has been bothering my sister for it ever since. When the lamps went out, he took the opportunity to steal

it. I do not think this, I know it. How? Well, on account of the confusion and darkness, I sat in my sister's seat when I returned to the table. This explains his mistake, but he put his arms round my neck, and deliberately felt for the opal. I did not understand his purpose at the time, but now it is very evident."

"Yes, madam," said I, "but how do you know it was Mr Gray?"

"Why, I grabbed his hand, and before he could pull it away I felt the large cameo ring on his little finger. Oh! there is no doubt whatever."

I asked her whether Mr Gray had his sleeves rolled up, and though she could not understand the purport of the question, she said "No". Next I had Miss Livingstone come in. She is a slight, tremulous young lady, who cries at the slightest provocation. During the interview, brief as it was, it was only by the greatest diplomacy that I avoided a scene of hysterics. She tried very hard to convince me that she knew absolutely nothing. She had not left her seat during the disturbance; of that she was sure. So how could she know anything about it? I asked her to name the one whom she thought might have taken the opal, and at this her agitation reached such a climax that I was obliged to let her go.'

'You gained very little from her I should say.'

'In a case of this kind, Mr Mitchel, where the criminal is surely one of a very few persons, we cannot fail to gain something from each person's story. A significant feature here was that though Miss Livingstone assures us that she did not leave her seat, she was sitting in a different place when the lamps were lighted again.'

'That might mean anything or nothing.'

'Exactly! but we are not deducing values yet. Mr Dennett Moore came to me next, and he is a straightforward, honest man if I ever saw one. He declared that the whole affair was a great mystery to him, and that, while ordinarily he would not care anything about it, he could not but be somewhat interested because he thought that one of the ladies, he would not say which one, suspected him. Mr Livingstone also impressed me favourably in spite of the fact that he did not remove his cigarette from his mouth throughout the whole of my interview with him. He declined to name the person suspected by him, though he admitted that he could do so. He made this significant remark:

"You are a detective of experience, Mr Barnes, and ought to be

able to decide which man amongst us could place his arms around Mrs Gray's neck without causing her to cry out. But if your imagination fails you, suppose you enquire into the financial standing of all of us, and see which one would be most likely to profit by thieving? Ask Mr Cortlandt."

'Evidently Mr Livingstone knows more than he tells.'

'Yet he told enough for one to guess his suspicions, and to understand the delicacy which prompted him to say no more. He, however, gave me a good point upon which to question Mr Cortlandt. When I asked that gentleman if any of the men happened to be in pecuniary difficulties, he became grave at once. I will give you his answer.

"Mr Livingstone and Mr Moore are both exceedingly wealthy men, and I am a millionaire, in very satisfactory business circumstances at present. But I am very sorry to say, that though our host, Mr Gray, is also a distinctly rich man, he has met with some reverses recently, and I can conceive that ready money would be useful to him. But for all that, it is preposterous to believe what your question evidently indicates. None of the persons in this party is a thief, and least of all could we suspect Mr Gray. I am sure that if he wished his wife's opal, she would give it to him cheerily. No, Mr Barnes, the opal is in some crack, or crevice, which we have overlooked. It is lost, not stolen."

'That ended the interviews with the several persons present, but I made one or two other enquiries, from which I elicited at least two significant facts. First, it was Mr Gray himself who had indicated the course by which the yacht was steered last night, and which ran her over a sand-bar. Second, some one had nearly emptied the oil from the lamps, so that they would have burned out in a short time, even though the yacht had not touched.'

'These, then, are your facts? And from these you have solved the problem? Well, Mr Barnes, who stole the opal?'

'Mr Mitchel, I have told you all I know, but I wish you to work out a solution before I reveal my own opinion.'

'I have already done so, Mr Barnes. Here! I will write my suspicion on a bit of paper. So! Now tell me yours, and you shall know mine afterwards.'

'Why, to my mind it is very simple. Mr Gray, failing to obtain the opal from his wife by fair means, resorted to a trick. He removed the oil from the lamps, and charted out a course for his yacht which

would take her over a sand-bar, and when the opportune moment came he stole the jewel. His actions since then have been merely to cover his crime, by shrouding the affair with mystery. By insisting upon a thorough search, and even sending for a detective, he makes it impossible for those who were present to accuse him hereafter. Undoubtedly Mr Cortlandt's opinion will be the one generally adopted. Now what do you think?

'I think I will go with you at once, and board the yacht *Idler*.'

'But you have not told me whom you suspect,' said Mr Barnes, somewhat irritated.

'Oh! That's immaterial,' said Mr Mitchel, calmly preparing for the street. 'I do not suspect Mr Gray, so if you are correct you will have shown better ability than I. Come! Let us hurry!'

On their way to the dock, from which they were to take the little steam launch which was waiting to carry the detective back to the yacht, Mr Barnes asked Mr Mitchel the following questions:

'Mr Mitchel,' said he, 'you will note that Mrs Cortlandt alluded to you as a "crank who collects gems". I must admit that I have myself harboured a great curiosity as to your reasons for purchasing jewels, which are valued beyond a mere conservative commercial price. Would you mind explaining why you began your collection?'

'I seldom explain my motives to others, especially when they relate to my more important pursuits in life. But in view of all that has passed between us, I think your curiosity justifiable, and I will gratify it. To begin with, I am a very wealthy man. I inherited great riches, and I have made a fortune myself. Have you any conception of the difficulties which harass a man of means?'

'Perhaps not in minute detail, though I can guess that the lot of the rich is not as free from care as the pauper thinks it is.'

'The point is this: the difficulty with a poor man is to get rich, while with the rich man the greatest trouble is to prevent the increase of his wealth. Some men, of course, make no effort in that direction, and those men are a menace to society. My own idea of the proper use of a fortune is to manage it for the benefit of others, as well as one's self, and especially to prevent its increase.'

'And is it so difficult to do this? Cannot money be spent without limit?'

'Yes; but unlimited evil follows such a course. This is sufficient to indicate to you that I am ever in search of a legitimate means of

spending my income, provided that I may do good thereby. If I can do this, and at the same time afford myself pleasure, I claim that I am making the best use of my money. Now I happen to be so constructed, that the most interesting studies to me are social problems, and of these I am most entertained with the causes and environments of crime. Such a problem as the one you brought to me today is of immense attractiveness to me, because the environment is one which is commonly supposed to preclude rather than to invite crime. Yet we have seen that despite the wealth of all concerned, some one has stooped to the commonest of crimes—theft.'

'But what has this to do with your collection of jewels?'

'Everything! Jewels—especially those of great magnitude—seem to be a special cause of crime. A hundred-carat diamond will tempt a man to theft, as surely as the false beacon on a rocky shore entices the mariner to wreck and ruin. All the great jewels of the world have murder and crime woven into their histories. My attention was first called to this by accidentally overhearing a plot in a ballroom to rob the lady of the house of a large ruby which she wore on her breast. I went to her, taking the privilege of an intimate friend, and told her enough to persuade her to sell the stone to me. I fastened it into my scarf, and then sought the presence of the plotters, allowing them to see what had occurred. No words passed between us, but by my act I prevented a crime that night.'

'Then am I to understand that you buy jewels with that end in view?'

'After that night I conceived this idea. If all the great jewels in the world could be collected together, and put in a place of safety, hundreds of crimes would be prevented, even before they had been conceived. Moreover, the search for, and acquirement of these jewels would necessarily afford me abundant opportunity for studying the crimes which are perpetrated in order to gain possession of them. Thus you understand more thoroughly why I am anxious to pursue this problem of the Azteck opal.'

Several hours later Mr Mitchel and Mr Barnes were sitting at a quiet table in the corner of the dining-room at Mr Mitchel's club. On board the yacht Mr Mitchel had acted rather mysteriously. He had been closeted a while with Mr Gray, after which he had had an interview with two or three of the others. Then when Mr Barnes had begun to feel neglected, and tired of waiting alone on deck, Mr



Mitchel had come towards him, arm-in-arm with Mr Gray, and the latter said:

'I am very much obliged to you, Mr Barnes, for your services in this affair, and I trust the enclosed cheque will remunerate you for your trouble.'

Mr Barnes, not quite comprehending it all, had attempted to protest, but Mr Mitchel had taken him by the arm, and hurried him off. In the cab which bore them to the club the detective asked for an explanation, but Mr Mitchel only replied:

'I am too hungry to talk now. We will have dinner first.'

The dinner was over at last, and nuts and coffee were before them, when Mr Mitchel took a small parcel from his pocket, and handed it to Mr Barnes, saying:

'It is a beauty, is it not?'

Mr Barnes removed the tissue paper, and a large opal fell on the tablecloth, where it sparkled with a thousand colours under the electric lamps.

'Do you mean that this is——,' cried the detective.

'The Azteck opal, and the finest harlequin I ever saw,' interrupted Mr Mitchel. 'But you wish to know how it came into my possession? Principally so that it may join the collection and cease to be a temptation to this world of wickedness.'

'Then Mr Gray did not steal it?' asked Mr Barnes, with a touch of chagrin in his voice.

'No, Mr Barnes! Mr Gray did not steal it. But you are not to consider yourself very much at fault. Mr Gray tried to steal it, only he failed. That was not your fault, of course. You read his actions aright, but you did not give enough weight to the stories of the others.'

'What important point did I omit from my calculation?'

'I might mention the bare arms which Mrs Gray said she felt round her neck. It was evidently Mr Gray who looked for the opal on the neck of his sister-in-law, but as he did not bare his arms, he would not have done so later.'

'Do you mean that Miss Livingstone was the thief?'

'No! Miss Livingstone being hysterical, she changed her seat without realizing it, but that does not make her a thief. Her excitement when with you was due to her suspicions, which, by the way, were correct. But let us return for a moment to the bare arms. That was the clue from which I worked. It was evident to me that the thief was

a man, and it was equally plain that in the hurry of the few moments of darkness, no man would have rolled up his sleeves, risking the return of the attendants with lamps, and the consequent discovery of himself in such a singular disarrangement of costume.'

'How do you account for the bare arms?'

'The lady did not tell the truth, that is all. The arms which encircled her neck were not bare. Neither were they unknown to her. She told you that lie to shield the thief. She also told you that her husband wished to sell the Azteck opal to me, but that she had refused. Thus she deftly led you to suspect him. Now, if she wished to shield the thief, yet was willing to accuse her husband, it followed that the husband was not the thief.'

'Very well reasoned, Mr Mitchel. I see now where you are tending, but I shall not get ahead of your story.'

'So much I had deduced, before we went on board the yacht. When I found myself alone with Gray I candidly told him of your suspicions, and your reasons for harbouring them. He was very much disturbed, and pleadingly asked me what I thought. As frankly I told him that I believed that he had tried to take the opal from his wife—we can scarcely call it stealing since the law does not but that I believed he had failed. He then confessed; admitted emptying the lamps, but denied running the boat on the sand-bar. But he assured me that he had not reached his wife's chair when the lamps were brought in. He was, therefore, much astonished at missing the gem. I promised him to find the jewel upon condition that he would sell it to me. To this he most willingly acceded.'

'But how could you be sure that you would recover the opal?'

'Partly by my knowledge of human nature, and partly because of my inherent faith in my own abilities. I sent for Mrs Gray, and noted her attitude of defence, which, however, only satisfied me the more that I was right in my suspicions. I began by asking her if she knew the origin of the superstition that an opal brings bad luck to its owner. She did not, of course, comprehend my tactics, but she added that she "had heard the stupid superstition, but took no interest in such nonsense". I then gravely explained to her that the opal is the engagement stone of the Orient. The lover gives it to his sweetheart, and the belief is that should she deceive him even in the most trifling manner, the opal will lose its brilliancy and become cloudy. I then suddenly asked her if she had ever noted a change in her opal. "What do you mean to insinuate?" she cried out angrily. "I mean," said I,

sternly, "that if an opal has changed colour in accordance with the superstition this one should have done so. I mean that though your husband greatly needs the money which I have offered him you have refused to allow him to sell it, and yet you have permitted another to take it from you tonight. By this act you might have seriously injured if not ruined Mr Gray. Why have you done it?"

'How did she receive it?' asked Mr Barnes, admiring the ingenuity of Mr Mitchel.

'She began to sob, and between her tears she admitted that the opal had been taken by the man I suspected, but she earnestly declared that she had harboured no idea of injuring her husband. Indeed, she was so agitated in speaking upon this point, that I believe that Gray never thoroughly explained to her why he wished to sell the gem. She urged me to recover the opal if possible, and purchase it, so that her husband might be relieved from his pecuniary embarrassment. I then sent for the thief, Mrs Gray told me his name; but would you not like to hear how I had picked him out before we went aboard? I still have that bit of paper upon which I wrote his name, in confirmation of what I say.'

'Of course, I know now that you mean Mr Livingstone, but would like to hear your reasons for suspecting him'.

'From your account Miss Livingstone suspected some one, and this caused her to be so agitated that she was unaware of the fact that she had changed her seat. Women are shrewd in these affairs, and I was confident that the girl had good reason for her conduct. It was evident that the person in her mind was either her brother or her sweetheart. I decided between these two men from your account of your interviews with them. Moore impressed you as being honest, and he told you that one of the ladies suspected him. In this he was mistaken, but his speaking to you of it was not the act of a thief. Mr Livingstone, on the other hand, tried to throw suspicion upon Mr Gray.'

'Of course that was sound reasoning after you had concluded that Mrs Gray was lying. Now tell me how you recovered the jewel?'

'That was easier than I expected. I simply told Mr Livingstone when I got him alone, what I knew, and asked him to hand me the opal. With a perfectly imperturbable manner, understanding that I promised secrecy, he quietly took it from his pocket and gave it to me, saying:

"Women are very poor conspirators. They are too weak."

‘What story did you tell Mr Gray?’

‘Oh, he would not be likely to enquire too closely into what I should tell him. My cheque was what he most cared for. I told him nothing definitely, but I inferred that his wife had secreted the gem during the darkness, that he might not ask her for it again; and that she had intended to find it again at a future time, just as he had meant to pawn it and then pretend to recover it from the thief by offering a reward.’

‘One more question. Why did Mr Livingstone steal it?’

‘Ah! The truth about that is another mystery worth probing, and one which I shall make it my business to unravel. I will venture two prophecies. First—Mr Livingstone did not steal it at all. Mrs Gray simply handed it to him in the darkness. There must have been some powerful motive to lead her to such an act; something which she was weighing, and decided impulsively. This brings me to the second point. Livingstone used the word conspirator, which is a clue. You will recall what I told you that this gem is one of a pair of opals, and that with the other, the two would be as interesting as any jewels in the world. I am confident now that Mr Livingstone knows where that other opal is, and that he has been urging Mrs Gray to give or lend him hers, as a means of obtaining the other. If she hoped to do this, it would be easy to understand why she refused to permit the sale of the one she had. This, of course, is guesswork, but I’ll promise that if any one ever owns both it shall be your humble servant, Leroy Mitchel, Jewel Collector.’