

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen
Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
Garnett Engels Byron Schiller
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
Cotton Dostoyevsky Hall
Baum Henry Kipling Doyle Willis
Leslie Dumas Flaubert Nietzsche Turgenev Balzac
Stockton Vatsyayana Crane
Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
Homer Tolstoy Whitman
Darwin Thoreau Twain
Potter Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato Scott
Kant Freud Jowett Stevenson Andersen Burton Harte
London Descartes Cervantes Wells Hesse
Poe Aristotle Wells Voltaire Cooke
Hale James Hastings Shakespeare Chambers Irving
Bunner Richter Chekhov da Shaw Wodehouse
Doré Dante Pushkin Alcott
Swift Chekhov Newton



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Tales from Bohemia

Robert Neilson Stephens

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ROBERT NEILSON STEPHENS

A MEMORY

One crisp evening early in March, 1887, I climbed the three flights of rickety stairs to the fourth floor of the old "Press" building to begin work on the "news desk." Important as the telegraph department was in making the newspaper, the desk was a crude piece of carpentry. My companions of the blue pencil irreverently termed it "the shelf." This was my second night in the novel dignity of editorship. Though my rank was the humblest, I appreciated the importance of a first step from "the street." An older man, the senior on the news desk, had preceded me. He was engaged in a bantering conversation with a youth who lolled at such ease as a well-worn, cane-bottomed screw-chair afforded. The older man made an informal introduction, and I learned that the youth with pale face and serene smile was "Mr. Stephens, private secretary to the managing editor." That information scarcely impressed me any more than it would now after more than twenty years' experience of managing editors and their private secretaries.

The bantering continued, and I learned that the youth cherished literary aspirations, and that he performed certain work in connection with the dramatic department for the managing editor, who kept theatrical news and criticisms within his personal control.

Suddenly a chance remark broke the ice for a friendship between the young man and me which was to last unbroken until his untimely death. Stephens wrote the Isaac Pitman phonography! Here had I been for more than three years wondering to find the shorthand writers of wide-awake and progressive America floundering in what I conceived to be the Serbonian bog of an archaic system of stenography. Unexpectedly a most superior young man came within my ken who was a disciple of Isaac Pitman. Furthermore, like myself, he was entirely self taught. No old shorthand writer who can look back a quarter of a century on his own youthful enthusiasm for the art can fail to appreciate what a bond of sympathy this

discovery constituted. From that night forward we were chosen friends, confiding our ambitions to each other, discussing the grave issues of life and death, settling the problems of literature. Notwithstanding his more youthful appearance, my seniority in age was but slight. Gradually "Bob," as all his friends called him with affectionate informality, was given opportunities to advance himself, under the kindly yet firm guidance of the managing editor, Mr. Bradford Merrill. That gentleman appreciated the distinct gifts of his young protégé, journalistic and literary, and he fostered them wisely and well. I remember perfectly the first criticism of an important play which "Bob" was permitted to write unaided. It was Richard Mansfield's initial appearance in Philadelphia as "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," at the Chestnut Street Theatre on Monday, October 3, 1887.

After the paper had gone to press, and while Mr. Merrill and a few of the telegraph editors were partaking of a light lunch, the night editor, the late R.E.A. Dorr, asked Mr. Merrill "how Stephens had made out."

"He has written a very clever and very interesting criticism," Mr. Merrill replied. "I had to edit it somewhat, because he was inclined to be Hugoesque and melodramatic in describing the action with very short sentences. But I am very much pleased, indeed."

That was the beginning of Bob's career as a dramatic critic, a career in which he gained authority and in which his literary faculties, his felicity of expression and soundness of judgment found adequate scope.

In the following two or three years the cultivation of the field of dramatic criticism occupied his time to the temporary exclusion of his ambition for creative work. He and I read independently; but our tastes had much in common, though his preference was for imaginative literature. Meanwhile I was writing short stories with plenty of plot, some of which found their way into various magazines; but his taste lay more in the line of the French short story writers who made an incident the medium for portraying a character. Historical romance had fascinations for me, but Alphonse Daudet attracted both of us to the artistic possibilities that lay in selecting the romance of real life for treatment in fiction as against the crude and repellent naturalism of Zola and his school. This fact is

not a little significant in view of the turn toward historical romance which exercised all the activities of Robert Neilson Stephens after the production of his play, "An Enemy to the King," by E.H. Southern.

Still our intimacy had prepared me for the change. Through many a long night after working hours we had wandered through the moonlit streets until daybreak exchanging views freely and sturdily on historical characters on the philosophy of history, on the character of Henry of Navarre and his followers, and on the worthies of Elizabethan England, in the literature of which we had immersed ourselves. Kipling had recently burst meteor-like on the world, and Barrie raised his head with a whimsical smile closely chasing a tear. Thomas Hardy was in the saddle writing "Tess," and in France Daudet was yet active though his prime was past. Guy de Maupassant continued the production of his marvellous short stories. These were the contemporary prose writers who engaged our attention. A little later we hailed the appearance of Stanley J. Weyman with "A Gentleman of France," and the Conan Doyle of "The White Company" and "Micah Clarke" rather than the creator of "Sherlock Holmes" commended our admiration. We were by no means in accord on the younger authors. Diversity of opinion stimulates critical discussion, however. I had not yet become reconciled to Kipling, who provoked my resentment by certain coarse flings at the Irish, but "Bob" hailed him with whole-hearted enthusiasm.

We were not the only members of the staff with literary aspirations. Others, like the late Andrew E. Watrous, had achievements of no mean order in prose and verse. Still others were sustaining the traditions of "The Press" as a newspaper office which throughout its history had been a stepping stone to magazine work and other forms of literary employment. Richard Harding Davis was on the paper and "Bob" Stephens was one of the two men most intimately in his confidence regarding his ambitions.

Finally Bob told me that "Dick" had taken him to his house and read to him
"A bully short story," adding, "It's a corker."

I inquired the nature of the story.

"Just about the 'Press' office," Bob replied,

Among other particulars I asked the title.

"Gallegher," said Bob.

Three years elapsed after our first acquaintance before Bob Stephens began writing stories and sketches. The "Tales from Bohemia" collected in this volume represent his early creative work. We were in the better sense a small band of Bohemians, the few friends and companions who will be found figuring in the tales under one guise or another. Many a merry prank and many a jest is recalled by these pages. Of criticism I have no word to say. Let the reader understand how they came into being and they will explain themselves. "Bob" Stephens took his own environment, the anecdotes he heard, the persons whom he met and the friends whom he knew, and he treated them as the writers of short stories in France twenty years ago treated their own Parisian environment. He made an incident the means of illustrating a portrayal of character. Later he was to construct elaborate plots for dramas and historical novels.

"Bohemianism" was but a brief episode in the life of "R. N. S." It ceased after his marriage. But his natural gaiety remained. Seldom was his joyous disposition overcast, or his winning smile eclipsed. For six months I was privileged to live in the house with his mother. If he had inherited his literary predilections from his father,—a highly respected educator of Huntington, Pa. from whose academy many eminent professional men were graduated,—his gentleness, his cheerfulness, his winning smile and the ingratiating qualities to which it was the key, as surely came from his mother.

I remember a time when he was inordinately grave for several days and pursued a tireless course of special reading through the office encyclopaedias and some books he had borrowed. At last he drew aside the veil of reserve which concealed his family affairs from even his closest friends and inquired if I could direct him to any recent authority on cancer. I divined the sad truth that his tenderly beloved mother was suffering from the dread disease. That was the day before serums, and nothing that he found to read in books or periodicals gave him a faint hope that his dear one could be cured. Thenceforward, mother and son awaited the inevitable end with uncomplaining patience which was characteristic of both.

His cheerful smile returned, and while the blow of bereavement was impending practically all these "Tales from Bohemia" were written.

To follow the career of "R.N.S." and trace his development after he gave up newspaper work in the fall of 1893 is not required in this place. "Tales from Bohemia" will be found interesting in themselves, apart from the fact that they illustrate another phase of the literary gift of a young writer who contributed so materially to the entertainment of playgoers and novel readers for a period of ten years after the work in this book was all done.

J.O.G.D.

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TALES FROM BOHEMIA

I

THE ONLY GIRL HE EVER LOVED

When Jack Morrow returned from the World's Fair, he found Philadelphia thermometers registering 95. The next afternoon he boarded a Chestnut Street car, got out at Front Street, hurried to the ferry station, and caught a just departing boat for Camden, and on arriving at the other side of the Delaware, made haste to find a seat in the well-filled express train bound for Atlantic City.

While he was being whirled across the level surface of New Jersey, past the cornfields and short stretches of green trees and restful cottage towns, he thought of the pleasure in store for him—the meeting with the young person whom he had gradually come to consider the loveliest girl in the world. Having neglected to read the list of "arrivals" in the newspapers, he knew not at what hotel she and her aunt were staying. But he would soon make the rounds of the large beach hotels, at one of which she was likely to be found.

She did not expect to see him. Therefore her first expression on beholding him would betray her feelings toward him, whatever they were. Should the indication be favourable, he would propose to her at the first opportunity, on beach, boardwalk, hotel piazza, pavilion, yacht or in the surf. Such were the meditations of Jack Morrow while the train roared across New Jersey to the sea.

The first sign of the flat green meadows, the smooth waters of the thoroughfare, the sails afar at the inlet and the long side of the sea-city stretching out against the sky at the very end of the earth is refreshing and exhilarating to any one. It gave a doubly keen enjoyment to Jack Morrow.

"Within an hour, perhaps," he mused, as the reviving odour of the salt water touched his nostrils, "I shall see Edith."

When with the crowd he had made his way out of the train, and traversed the long platform at the Atlantic City station, ignoring the

stentorian solicitations of the 'bus drivers, he started walking toward the ocean promenade, invited by the glimpse of sea at the far end of the avenue. Thus he crossed that wide thoroughfare—Atlantic Avenue—with its shops and trolley-cars; passed picturesque hotels and cottages; crossed Pacific Avenue where carriages and dog-carts were being driven rapidly between the rows of pretty summer edifices, and traversed the famously long block that ends at the boardwalk and the strand.

He succeeded in getting a third-floor room on the ocean side of the first hotel where he applied. He learned from the clerk that Edith was not at this house. Sea air having revived his appetite, he decided to dine before setting out in search of her.

When, after his meal, he reached the boardwalk, the electric lights had already been turned on and the regular evening crowd of promenaders was beginning to form. He strolled along now looking at the beach and the sea, now at the boardwalk crowd where he might perhaps at any moment behold the face of "the loveliest girl in the world." He beheld instead, as he approached the Tennessee pier, the face of his friend George Haddon.

"Hello, old boy!" exclaimed Morrow, grasping his friend's hand. "What are you doing here? I thought your affairs would keep you in New York all summer."

"So they would," replied Haddon, in a tone and with a look whose distress he made little effort to conceal. "But something happened."

"Why, what on earth's the matter? You seem horribly downcast."

Haddon was silent for a moment; then he said suddenly:

"I'll tell you all about it. I have to tell somebody or it will split my head. But come out on the pier, away from the noise of that merry-go-round organ."

Neither spoke as the two young men passed through the concert pavilion and dancing hall out to a quieter part of the long pier. They sat near the railing and looked out over the sea, on which, as evening fell, the rippling band of moonlight grew more and more luminous. They could see, at the right, the long line of brilliant lights on

the boardwalk, and the increasing army of promenaders. Detached from the furthest end of the line of boardwalk lights, shone those of distant Longport. Above these, the sky had turned from heliotrope to hues dark and indefinable, but indescribably beautiful. Down on the beach were only a few people, strolling near the tide line, a carriage, a man on horseback, and three frolicking dogs.

"It's simply this," abruptly began Haddon. "Six weeks ago I was married to—"

"Why, I never heard of it. Let me congrat—"

"No, don't, I was married to a comic opera singer, named Lulu Ray. I don't suppose you've ever heard of her, for she was only recently promoted from the chorus to fill small parts. We took a flat, and lived happily on the whole, for a month, although with such small quarrels as might be expected. Two weeks ago she went out and didn't come back. Since then I haven't been able to find her in New York or at any of the resorts along the Jersey coast. I suppose she was offended at something I said during a quarrel that grew out of my insisting on our staying in New York all summer. Knowing her liking for Atlantic City—she was a Philadelphia girl before she went on the stage—I came here at once to hunt her up and apologize and agree to her terms."

"Well?"

"Well, I haven't found her. She's not at any hotel in Atlantic City. I'm going back to New York to-morrow to get some clue as to where she is."

"I suppose you're very fond of her still?"

"Yes; that's the trouble. And then, of course, a man doesn't like to have a woman who bears his name going around the country alone, her whereabouts unknown."

Morrow was on the point of saying: "Or perhaps with some other man," but he checked himself. He was sufficiently mundane to refrain from attempting to reason Haddon out of his affection for the fugitive, or to advise him as to what to do. He knew that in merely letting Haddon unburden on him the cause of anxiety, he had done all that Haddon would expect from any friend.

He limited himself, therefore, to reminding Haddon that all men have their annoyances in this life; to treating the woman's offence as light and commonplace, and to cheering him up by making him join in seeing the sights of the boardwalk.

They looked on at the pier hop, while Professor Willard's musicians played popular tunes; returned to the boardwalk and watched the pretty girls leaning against the wooden beasts on the merry-go-round while the organ screamed forth, "Daddy Wouldn't Buy Me a Bow Wow;" experienced that not very illusive illusion known as "The Trip to Chicago;" were borne aloft on an observation wheel; made the rapid transit of the toboggan slide, visited the phonographs and heard a shrill reproduction of "Molly and I and the Baby;" tried the slow and monotonous ride on the "Figure Eight," and the swift and varied one on the switchback. They bought saltwater taffy and ate it as they passed down the boardwalk and looked at the moonlight. Down on the Bowery-like part of the boardwalk they devoured hot sausages, and in a long pavilion drank passable beer and saw a fair variety show. Thence they left the boardwalk, walked to Atlantic Avenue and mounted a car that bore them to Shauffler's, where among light-hearted beer drinkers they heard the band play "Sousa's Cadet March" and "After the Ball," and so they arrived at midnight.

All this was beneficial to Haddon and pleasant enough in itself, but it prevented Morrow that night from prosecuting his search for the loveliest girl in the world. He postponed the search to the next day. And when that time came, after Haddon had started for New York, occurred an event that caused Morrow to postpone the search still further.

He had decided to go up the boardwalk on the chance of seeing Edith in a pavilion or on the beach. If he should reach the vicinity of the lighthouse without finding her, he would turn back and inquire at every hotel near the beach until he should obtain news of her.

He had reached Pennsylvania Avenue when he was attracted by the white tents that here dotted the wide beach. He went down the high flight of steps from the boardwalk to rest awhile in the shade of one of the tents.