

HUME FERGUS

THE OPAL
SERPENT

Fergus Hume
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Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	10
CHAPTER III	16
CHAPTER IV	22
CHAPTER V	27
CHAPTER VI	32
CHAPTER VII	37
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	38

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CHAPTER I

DON QUIXOTE IN LONDON

Simon Beecot was a country gentleman with a small income, a small estate and a mind considerably smaller than either. He dwelt at Wargrove in Essex and spent his idle hours – of which he possessed a daily and nightly twenty-four – in snarling at his faded wife and in snapping between whiles at his son. Mrs. Beecot, having been bullied into old age long before her time, accepted sour looks and hard words as necessary to God's providence, but Paul, a fiery youth, resented useless nagging. He owned more brain-power than his progenitor, and to this favoring of Nature paterfamilias naturally objected. Paul also desired fame, which was likewise a crime in the fire-side tyrant's eyes.

As there were no other children Paul was heir to the Beecot acres, therefore their present proprietor suggested that his son should wait with idle hands for the falling in of the heritage. In plain words, Mr. Beecot, coming of a long line of middle-class loafers, wished his son to be a loafer also. Again, when Mrs. Beecot retired to a tearful rest, her bully found Paul a useful person on whom to expend his spleen. Should this whipping-boy leave, Mr. Beecot would have to forego this enjoyment, as servants object to being sworn at without cause. For years Mr. Beecot indulged in bouts of bad temper, till Paul, finding twenty-five too dignified an age to tolerate abuse, announced his intention of storming London as a scribbler.

The parents objected in detail. Mrs. Beecot, after her kind, dissolved in tears, and made reference to young birds leaving the nest, while her husband, puffed out like a frog, and redder than the wattles of a turkey-cock, exhausted himself in well-chosen expressions. Paul increased the use of these by fixing a day for his departure. The female Beecot retired to bed with the assistance of a maid, burnt feathers and sal volatile, and the male, as a last and clinching argument, figuratively buttoned up his pockets.

"Not one shilling will you get from me," said Beecot senior, with the graceful addition of vigorous adjectives.

"I don't ask for money," said Paul, keeping his temper, for after all the turkey-cock was his father. "I have saved fifty pounds. Not out of my pocket-money," he added hastily, seeing further objections on the way. "I earned it by writing short stories."

"The confounded mercantile instinct," snorted paterfamilias, only he used stronger words. "Your mother's uncle was in trade. Thank Heaven none of my people ever used hands or brains. The Beecots lived like gentlemen."

"I should say like cabbages from your description, father."

"No insolence, sir. How dare you disgrace your family? Writing tales indeed! Rubbish I expect" (here several adjectives). "And you took money I'll be bound, eh! eh!"

"I have just informed you that I took all I could get," said Beecot junior, quietly. "I'll live in Town on my savings. When I make a name and a fortune I'll return."

"Never! never!" gobbled the turkey-cock. "If you descend to the gutter you can wallow there. I'll cut you out of my will."

"Very good, sir, that's settled. Let us change the subject."

But the old gentleman was too high-spirited to leave well alone. He demanded to know if Paul knew to whom he was talking, inquired if he had read the Bible touching the duties of children to their parents, instanced the fact that Paul's dear mother would probably pine away and die, and ended

with a pathetic reference to losing the prop of his old age. Paul listened respectfully and held to his own opinion. In defence of the same he replied in detail, —

"I am aware that I talk to my father, sir," said he, with spirit; "you never allow me to forget that fact. If another man spoke to me as you do I should probably break his head. I *have* read the Bible, and find therein that parents owe a duty to their children, which certainly does not include being abused like a pick-pocket. My mother will not pine away if you will leave her alone for at least three hours a day. And as to my being the prop of your old age, your vigor of language assures me that you are strong enough to stand alone."

Paterfamilias, never bearded before, hastily drank a glass of port – the two were enjoying the usual pleasant family meal when the conversation took place – and said – but it is useless to detail his remarks. They were all sound and no sense. In justice to himself, and out of pity for his father, Paul cut short the scene by leaving the room with his determination unchanged. Mr. Beecot thereupon retired to bed, and lectured his wife on the enormity of having brought a parricide into the world. Having been countered for once in his life with common-sense, he felt that he could not put the matter too strongly to a woman, who was too weak to resent his bullying.

Early next day the cause of the commotion, not having swerved a hair's-breadth from the path he had marked out, took leave of his mother, and a formal farewell of the gentleman who described himself as the best of fathers. Beecot senior, turkey-cock and tyrant, was more subdued now that he found bluster would not carry his point. But the wave of common-sense came too late. Paul departed bag and baggage, and his sire swore to the empty air. Even Mrs. Beecot was not available, as she had fainted.

Once Paul was fairly out of the house paterfamilias announced that the glory of Israel had departed, removed his son's photograph from the drawing-room, and considered which of the relatives he had quarrelled with he should adopt. Privately, he thought he had been a trifle hard on the lad, and but for his obstinacy – which he called firmness – he would have recalled the prodigal. But that enterprising adventurer was beyond hearing, and had left no address behind him. Beecot, the bully, was not a bad old boy if only he had been firmly dealt with, so he acknowledged that Paul had a fine spirit of his own, inherited from himself, and prophesied incorrectly. "He'll come back when the fifty pounds is exhausted," said he in a kind of dejected rage, "and when he does – " A clenched fist shaken at nothing terminated the speech and showed that the leopard could not change his spots.

So Paul Beecot repaired to London, and after the orthodox fashion began to cultivate the Muses on a little oatmeal by renting a Bloomsbury garret. There he wrote reams on all subjects and in all styles, and for six months assiduously haunted publishers' doors with varying fortunes. Sometimes he came away with a cheque, but more often with a bulky manuscript bulging his pocket. When tired of setting down imaginary woes he had time to think of his own; but being a cheerful youth, with an indomitable spirit, he banished trouble by interesting himself in the cheap world. By this is meant the world which costs no money to view – the world of the street. Here he witnessed the drama of humanity from morning till night, and from sunset till dawn, and on the whole witnessed very good acting. The poorer parts in the human comedy were particularly well played, and starving folks were quite dramatic in their demands for food. Note-book in hand, Paul witnessed spectacular shows in the West End, grotesque farces in the Strand, melodrama in Whitechapel and tragedy on Waterloo Bridge at midnight. Indeed, he quite spoiled the effect of a sensation scene by tugging at the skirts of a starving heroine who wished to take a river journey into the next world. But for the most part, he remained a spectator and plagiarised from real life.

Shortly, the great manager of the Universal Theatre enlisted Paul as an actor, and he assumed the double *rôle* of an unappreciated author and a sighing lover. In the first capacity he had in his desk ten short stories, a couple of novels, three dramas and a sheaf of doubtful verses. These failed to appeal to editor, manager or publisher, and their author found himself reduced to his last five-pound note. Then the foolish, ardent lad must needs fall in love. Who his divinity was, what she was,

and why she should be divinised, can be gathered from a conversation her worshipper held with an old school-fellow.

It was in Oxford Street at five o'clock on a June afternoon that Paul met Grexon Hay. Turning the corner of the street leading to his Bloomsbury attic, the author was tapped on the shoulder by a resplendent Bond Street being. That is, the said being wore a perfectly-fitting frock-coat, a silk hat, trousers with the regulation fold back and front, an orchid buttonhole, grey gloves, boots that glittered, and carried a gold-topped cane. The fact that Paul wheeled without wincing showed that he was not yet in debt. Your Grub Street old-time author would have leaped his own length at the touch. But Paul, with a clean conscience, turned slowly, and gazed without recognition into the clean-shaven, calm, cold face that confronted his inquiring eyes.

"Beecot!" said the newcomer, taking rapid stock of Paul's shabby serge suit and worn looks. "I thought I was right."

The voice, if not the face, awoke old memories.

"Hay – Grexon Hay!" cried the struggling genius. "Well, I am glad to see you," and he shook hands with the frank grip of an honest man.

"And I you." Hay drew his friend up the side street and out of the human tide which deluged the pavement. "But you seem –"

"It's a long story," interrupted Paul flushing. "Come to my castle and I'll tell you all about it, old boy. You'll stay to supper, won't you? See here" – Paul displayed a parcel – "a pound of sausages. You loved 'em at school, and I'm a superfine cook."

Grexon Hay always used expression and word to hide his feelings. But with Paul – whom he had always considered a generous ass at Torrington school – a trifle of self-betrayal didn't matter much. Beecot was too dense, and, it may be added, too honest to turn any opportunity to advantage. "It's a most surprising thing," said Hay, in his calm way, "really a most surprising thing, that a Torrington public school boy, my friend, and the son of wealthy parents, should be buying sausages."

"Come now," said Paul, with great spirit and towing Hay homeward, "I haven't asked you for money."

"If you do you shall have it," said Hay, but the offer was not so generous a one as would appear. That was Hay all over. He always said what he did not mean, and knew well that Beecot's uneasy pride shied at loans however small.

Paul, the unsophisticated, took the shadow of generosity for its substance, and his dark face lighted up. "You're a brick, Hay," he declared, "but I don't want money. No!" – this in reply to an eloquent glance from the well-to-do – "I have sufficient for my needs, and besides," with a look at the resplendent dress of the fashion-plate dandy, "I don't glitter in the West End."

"Which hints that those who do, are rich," said Grexon, with an arctic smile. "Wrong, Beecot. I'm poor. Only paupers can afford to dress well."

"In that case I must be a millionaire," laughed Beecot, glancing downward at his well-worn garb. "But mount these stairs; we have much to say to one another."

"Much that is pleasant," said the courtly Grexon.

Paul shrugged his square shoulders and stepped heavenward. "On your part, I hope," he sang back; "certainly not on mine. Come to Poverty Castle," and the fashionable visitor found his host lighting the fire in an apartment such as he had read about but had never seen.

It was quite the proper garret for starving genius – small, bleak, bare, but scrupulously clean. The floor was partially covered with scraps of old carpet, faded and worn; the walls were entirely papered with pictures from illustrated journals. One window, revealing endless rows of dingy chimney-pots, was draped with shabby rep curtains of a dull red. In one corner, behind an Indian screen, stood a narrow camp bedstead, covered with a gaudy Eastern shawl, and also a large tin bath, with a can of water beside it. Against the wall leaned a clumsy deal bookcase filled with volumes well-thumbed and in old bindings. On one side of the tiny fireplace was a horse-hair sofa, rendered less slippery by

an expensive fur rug thrown over its bareness; on the other was a cupboard, whence Beecot rapidly produced crockery, knives, forks, a cruet, napkins and other table accessories, all of the cheapest description. A deal table in the centre of the room, an antique mahogany desk, heaped high with papers, under the window, completed the furnishing of Poverty Castle. And it was up four flights of stairs like that celebrated attic in Thackeray's poem.

"As near heaven as I am likely to get," rattled on Beecot, deftly frying the sausages, after placing his visitor on the sofa. "The grub will soon be ready. I'm a first-class cook, bless you, old chap. Housemaid too. Clean, eh?" He waved the fork proudly round the ill-furnished room. "I'd dismiss myself if it wasn't."

"But – but," stammered Hay, much amazed, and surveying things through an eye-glass. "What are you doing here?"

"Trying to get my foot on the first rung of Fame's ladder."

"But I don't quite see –"

"Read Balzac's life and you will. His people gave him an attic and a starvation allowance in the hope of disgusting him. Bar the allowance, my pater has done the same. Here's the attic, and here's my starvation" – Paul gaily popped the frizzling sausages on a chipped hot plate – "and here's your aspiring servant hoping to be novelist, dramatist, and what not – to say nothing of why not? Mustard, there you are. Wait a bit. I'll brew you tea or cocoa."

"I never take those things with meals, Beecot."

"Your kit assures me of that. Champagne's more in your line. I say, Grexon, what are you doing now?"

"What other West-End men do," said Grexon, attacking a sausage.

"That means nothing. Well, you never did work at Torrington, so how can I expect the leopard to change his saucy spots."

Hay laughed, and, during the meal, explained his position. "On leaving school I was adopted by a rich uncle," he said. "When he went the way of all flesh he left me a thousand a year, which is enough to live on with strict economy. I have rooms in Alexander Street, Camden Hill, a circle of friends, and a good appetite, as you will perceive. With these I get through life very comfortably."

"Ha!" said Paul, darting a keen glance at his visitor, "you have the strong digestion necessary to happiness. Have you the hard heart also? If I remember at school –"

"Oh, hang school!" said Grexon, flushing all over his cold face. "I never think of school. I was glad when I got away from it. But we were great friends at school, Paul."

"Something after the style of Steerforth and David Copperfield," was Paul's reply as he pushed back his plate; "you were my hero, and I was your slave. But the other boys –" He looked again.

"They hated me, because they did not understand me, as you did."

"If that is so, Grexon, why did you let me slip out of your life? It is ten years since we parted. I was fifteen and you twenty."

"Which now makes us twenty-five and thirty respectively," said Hay, dryly; "you left school before I did."

"Yes; I had scarlet fever, and was taken home to be nursed. I never went back, and since then I have never met an old Torrington boy –"

"Have you not?" asked Hay, eagerly.

"No. My parents took me abroad, and I sampled a German university. I returned to idle about my father's place, till I grew sick of doing nothing, and, having ambitions, I came to try my luck in town." He looked round and laughed. "You see my luck."

"Well," said Hay, lighting a dainty cigarette produced from a gold case, "my uncle, who died, sent me to Oxford and then I travelled. I am now on my own, as I told you, and haven't a relative in the world."

"Why don't you marry?" asked Paul, with a flush.

Hay, wary man-about-town as he was, noted the flush, and guessed its cause. He could put two and two together as well as most people.

"I might ask you the same question," said he.

The two friends looked at one another, and each thought of the difference in his companion since the old school-days. Hay was clean-shaven, fair-haired, and calm, almost icy, in manner. His eyes were blue and cold. No one could tell what was passing in his mind from the expression of his face. As a matter of fact he usually wore a mask, but at the present moment, better feelings having the upper hand, the mask had slipped a trifle. But as a rule he kept command of expression, and words, and actions. An admirable example of self-control was Grexon Hay.

On the other hand, Beecot was slight, tall and dark, with an eager manner and a face which revealed his thoughts. His complexion was swart; he had large black eyes, a sensitive mouth, and a small moustache smartly twisted upward. He carried his head well, and looked rather military in appearance, probably because many of his forebears had been Army men. While Hay was smartly dressed in a Bond Street kit, Paul wore a well-cut, shabby blue serge. He looked perfectly well-bred, but his clothes were woefully threadbare.

From these and the garret and the lean meal of sausages Hay drew his conclusions and put them into words.

"Your father has cut you off," said he, calmly, "and yet you propose to marry."

"How do you know both things?"

"I keep my eyes open, Paul. I see this attic and your clothes. I saw also the flush on your face when you asked me why I did not marry. You are in love?"

"I am," said Beecot, becoming scarlet, and throwing back his head. "It is clever of you to guess it. Prophecy more."

Hay smiled in a cold way. "I prophesy that if you marry on nothing you will be miserable. But of course," he looked sharply at his open-faced friend, "the lady may be rich."

"She is the daughter of a second-hand bookseller called Norman, and I believe he combines selling books with pawnbroking."

"Hum," said Hay, "he might make money out of the last occupation. Is he a Jew by any chance?"

"No. He is a miserable-looking, one-eyed Christian, with the manner of a frightened rabbit."

"One-eyed and frightened," repeated Hay, musingly, but without change of expression; "desirable father-in-law. And the daughter?"

"Sylvia. She is an angel, a white lily, a –"

"Of course," said Grexon, cutting short these rhapsodies. "And what do you intend to marry on?"

Beecot fished a shabby blue velvet case out of his pocket. "On my last five pounds and this," he said, opening the case.

Hay looked at the contents of the case, and saw a rather large brooch made in the form of a jewelled serpent. "Opals, diamonds and gold," he said slowly, then looked up eagerly. "Sell it to me."

CHAPTER II

DEBORAH JUNK, DUENNA

Number forty-five Gwynne Street was a second-hand bookshop, and much of the stock was almost as old as the building itself. A weather-stained board of faded blue bore in tarnished gold lettering the name of its owner, and under this were two broad windows divided by a squat door, open on week-days from eight in the morning until eight at night. Within the shop was dark and had a musty odor.

On either side of the quaint old house was a butcher's and a baker's, flaunting places of business, raw in their newness. Between the first-named establishment and the bookshop a low, narrow passage led to a small backyard and to a flight of slimy steps, down which clients who did not wish to be seen could arrive at a kind of cellar to transact business with Mr. Norman.

This individual combined two distinct trades. On the ground floor he sold second-hand books; in the cellar he bought jewels and gave money on the same to needy people. In the shop, pale youths, untidy, abstracted old men, spectacled girls, and all varieties of the pundit caste were to be seen poring over ancient volumes or exchanging words with the proprietor. But to the cellar came fast young men, aged spendthrifts, women of no reputation and some who were very respectable indeed. These usually came at night, and in the cellar transactions would take place which involved much money exchanging hands. In the daytime Mr. Norman was an innocent bookseller, but after seven he retired to the cellar and became as genuine a pawnbroker as could be found in London. Touching books he was easy enough to deal with, but a Shylock as regards jewels and money lent. With his bookish clients he passed for a dull shopkeeper who knew little about literature; but in the underground establishment he was spoken of, by those who came to pawn, as a usurer of the worst. In an underhand way he did a deal of business.

Aaron Norman – such was the name over the shop – looked like a man with a past – a miserable past, for in his one melancholy eye and twitching, nervous mouth could be read sorrow and apprehension. His face was pale, and he had an odd habit of glancing over his left shoulder, as though he expected to be tapped thereon by a police officer. Sixty years had rounded his shoulders and weakened his back, so that his one eye was almost constantly on the ground. Suffering had scored marks on his forehead and weary lines round his thin-lipped mouth. When he spoke he did so in a low, hesitating voice, and when he looked up, which was seldom, his eye revealed a hunted look like that of a wearied beast fearful lest it should be dragged from its lair.

It was this strange-looking man that Paul Beecot encountered in the doorway of the Gwynne Street shop the day after his meeting with Hay. Many a visit had Paul paid to that shop, and not always to buy books. Norman knew him very well, and, recognizing him in a fleeting look as he passed through the doorway, smiled weakly. Behind the counter stood Bart Tawsey, the lean underling, who was much sharper with buyers than was his master, but after a disappointed glance in his direction Paul addressed himself to the bookseller. "I wish to see you particularly," he said, with his eager air.

"I am going out on important business," said Norman, "but if you will not be very long –"

"It's about a brooch I wish to pawn."

The old man's mouth became hard and his eyes sharper. "I can't attend to that now, Mr. Beecot," he said, and his voice rang out louder than usual. "After seven."

"It's only six now," said Paul, looking over his shoulder at a church clock which could be seen clearly in the pale summer twilight. "I can't wait."

"Well, then, as you are an old customer – of books," said Aaron, with emphasis, "I'll stretch a point. You can go below at a quarter to seven, and I'll come round through the outside passage to

see you. Meantime, I must go about my business," and he went away with his head hanging and his solitary eye searching the ground as usual.

Paul, in spite of his supposed hurry, was not ill-pleased that Aaron had gone out and that there was an idle hour before him. He stepped lightly into the shop, and, under the flaring gas – which was lighted, so dark was the interior of the shop in spite of the luminous gloaming – he encountered the smile of Barty. Paul, who was sensitive and proudly reticent, grew red. He knew well enough that his apparent admiration of Sylvia Norman had attracted the notice of Bart and of the red-armed wench, Deborah Junk, who was the factotum of the household. Not that he minded, for both these servants were devoted to Sylvia, and knowing that she returned the feelings of Paul said nothing about the position to Aaron. Beecot could not afford to make enemies of the pair, and had no wish to do so. They were coarse-grained and common, but loyal and kindly of heart.

"Got any new books, Bart?" asked Beecot, coming forward with roving eyes, for he hoped to see Sylvia glide out of the darkness to bless his hungry eyes.

"No, sir. We never get new books," replied Bart, smartly. "Leastways there's a batch of second-hand novels published last year. But bless you, Mr. Beecot, there ain't nothing new about them 'cept the bindings."

"You are severe, Bart. I hope to be a novelist myself."

"We need one, sir. For the most part them as write now ain't novelists, if that means telling anything as is new. But I must go upstairs, sir. Miss Sylvia said I was to tell her when you came."

"Oh, yes – er – er – that is – she wants to see a photograph of my old home. I promised to show it to her." Paul took a parcel out of his pocket. "Can't I go up?"

"No, sir. 'Twouldn't be wise. The old man may come back, and if he knew as you'd been in his house," Bart jerked his head towards the ceiling, "he'd take a fit."

"Why? He doesn't think I'm after the silver?"

"Lor' bless you no, sir. It ain't that. What's valuable – silver and gold and jewels and such like – is down there." Bart nodded towards the floor. "But Mr. Norman don't like people coming into his private rooms. He's never let in anyone for years."

"Perhaps he fears to lose the fairest jewel he has."

Bart was what the Scotch call "quick in the uptake." "He don't think so much of her as he ought to, sir," said he, gloomily. "But I know he loves her, and wants to make her a great heiress. When he goes to the worms Miss Sylvia will have a pretty penny. I only hope," added Bart, looking slyly at Paul, "that he who has her to wife won't squander what the old man has worked for."

Beecot colored still more at this direct hint, and would have replied, but at this moment a large, red-faced, ponderous woman dashed into the shop from a side door. "There," said she, clapping her hands in a childish way, "I know'd his vice, an' I ses to Miss Sylvia, as is sittin' doing needlework, which she do do lovely, I ses 'That's him,' and she ses, with a lovely color, 'Oh, Deborah, jus' see, fur m'heart's abeating too loud for me t'ear 'is vice.' So I ses – "

Here she became breathless and clapped her hands again, so as to prevent interruption. But Paul did interrupt her, knowing from experience that when once set going Deborah would go on until pulled up. "Can't I go up to Miss Norman?" he asked.

"You may murder me, and slay me, and trample on my corp," said Deborah, solemnly, "but go up you can't. Master would send me to walk the streets if I dared to let you, innocent as you are, go up them stairs."

Paul knew long ago how prejudiced the old man was in this respect. During all the six months he had known Sylvia he had never been permitted to mount the stairs in question. It was strange that Aaron should be so particular on this point, but connecting it with his downcast eye and frightened air, Paul concluded, though without much reason, that the old man had something to conceal. More, that he was frightened of someone. However, he did not argue the point, but suggested a meeting-place. "Can't I see her in the cellar?" he asked. "Mr. Norman said I could go down to wait for him."

"Sir," said Deborah, plunging forward a step, like a stumbling 'bus horse, "don't tell me as you want to pawn."

"Well, I do," replied Paul, softly, "but you needn't tell everyone."

"It's only Bart," cried Deborah, casting a fierce look in the direction of the slim, sharp-faced young man, "and if he was to talk I'd take his tongue out. That I would. I'm a-training him to be my husband, as I don't hold with the ready-made article, and married he shall be, by parsing and clark if he's a good boy and don't talk of what don't matter to him."

"I ain't goin' to chatter," said Bart, with a wink. "Lor' bless you, sir, I've seen gentlemen as noble as yourself pawning things down there" – he nodded again towards the floor – "ah, and ladies too, but –"

"Hold your tongue," cried Deborah, pitching herself across the floor like a ship in distress. "Your a-talking now of what you ain't a right to be a-talkin' of, drat you. Come this way, Mr. Beecot, to the place where old Nick have his home, for that he is when seven strikes."

"You shouldn't speak of your master in that way," protested Paul.

"Oh, shouldn't I," snorted the maid, with a snort surprisingly loud. "And who have a better right, sir? I've been here twenty year as servant and nuss and friend and 'umble well-wisher to Miss Sylvia, coming a slip of a girl at ten, which makes me thirty, I don't deny; not that it's too old to marry Bart, though he's but twenty, and makes up in wickedness for twice that age. I know master, and when the sun's up there ain't a better man living, but turn on the gas and he's an old Nick. Bart, attend to your business and don't open them long ears of yours too wide. I won't have a listening husband, I can tell you. This way, sir. Mind the steps."

By this time Deborah had convoyed Paul to a dark corner behind the counter and jerked back a trap door. Here he saw a flight of wooden steps which led downwards into darkness. But Miss Junk snatched up a lantern on the top step, and having lighted it dropped down, holding it above her red and touzelled head. Far below her voice was heard crying to Beecot to "Come on"; therefore he followed as quickly as he could, and soon found himself in the cellar. All around was dark, but Deborah lighted a couple of flaring gas-jets, and then turned, with her arms akimbo, on the visitor.

"Now then, sir, you and me must have a talk, confidential like," said she in her breathless way. "It's pawning is it? By which I knows that you ain't brought that overbearing pa of yours to his knees."

Paul sat down in a clumsy mahogany chair, which stood near a plain deal table, and stared at the handmaiden. "I never told you about my father," he said, exhibiting surprise.

"Oh, no, of course not" – Miss Junk tossed her head – "me being a babe an' a suckling, not fit to be told anything. But you told Miss Sylvia and she told me, as she tells everything to her Debby, God bless her for a pretty flower!" She pointed a coarse, red finger at Paul. "If you were a gay deceiver, Mr. Beecot, I'd trample on your corp this very minute if I was to die at Old Bailey for the doing of it."

Seeing Deborah was breathless again, Paul seized his chance. "There is no reason you shouldn't know all about me, and –"

"No, indeed, I should think not, begging your pardon, sir. But when you comes here six months back, I ses to Miss Sylvia, I ses, 'He's making eyes at you, my lily,' and she ses to me, she says, 'Oh, Debby, I love him, that I do.' And then I ses, ses I, 'My pretty, he looks a gent born and bred, but that's the wust kind, so we'll find out if he's a liar before you loses your dear heart to him.'"

"But I'm not a liar –" began Paul, only to be cut short again.

"As well I knows," burst out Miss Junk, her arms akimbo again. "Do you think, sir, as I'd ha' let you come loving my pretty one and me not knowing if you was Judas or Jezebel? Not me, if I never drank my nightly drop of beer again. What you told Miss Sylvia of your frantic pa and your loving ma she told me. Pumping *you* may call it," shouted Deborah, emphasising again with the red finger, "but everything you told in your lover way she told her old silly Debby. I ses to Bart, if you loves me, Bart, go down to Wargrove, wherever it may be – if in England, which I doubt – and if he – meaning you – don't tell the truth, out he goes if I have the chucking of him myself and a police-court summings

over it. So Bart goes to Wargrove, and he find out that you speaks true, which means that you're a gent, sir, if ever there was one, in spite of your frantic pa, so I hopes as you'll marry my flower, and make her happy – bless you," and Deborah spread a large pair of mottled arms over Paul's head.

"It's all true," said he, good-naturedly; "my father and I don't get on well together, and I came to make a name in London. But for all you know, Deborah, I may be a scamp."

"That you are not," she burst out. "Why, Bart's been follerin' you everywhere, and he and me, which is to be his lawful wife and master, knows all about you and that there place in Bloomsbury, and where you go and where you don't go. And let me tell you, sir," again she lifted her finger threateningly, "if you wasn't what you oughter be, never would you see my pretty one again. No, not if I had to wash the floor in your blue blood – for blue it is, if what Bart learned was true of them stone figgers in the church," and she gasped.

Paul was silent for a few minutes, looking at the floor. He wondered that he had not guessed all this. Often it had seemed strange to him that so faithful and devoted a couple of retainers as Bart and Deborah Junk should favor his wooing of Sylvia and keep it from their master, seeing that they knew nothing about him. But from the woman's story – which he saw no reason to disbelieve – the two had not rested until they had been convinced of his respectability and of the truth of his story. Thus they had permitted the wooing to continue, and Paul privately applauded them for their tact in so making sure of him without committing themselves to open speech. "All the same," he said aloud, and following his own thoughts, "it's strange that you should wish her to marry me."

Miss Junk made a queer answer. "I'm glad enough to see her marry anyone respectable, let alone a gent, as you truly are, with stone figgers in churches and a handsome face, though rather dark for my liking. Mr. Beecot, twenty year ago, a slip of ten, I come to nuss the baby as was my loving angel upstairs, and her ma had just passed away to jine them as lives overhead playing harps. All these years I've never heard a young step on them stairs, save Miss Sylvia's and Bart's, him having come five years ago, and a brat he was. And would you believe it, Mr. Beecot, I know no more of the old man than you do. He's queer, and he's wrong altogether, and that frightened of being alone in the dark as you could make him a corp with a turnip lantern."

"What is he afraid of?"

"Ah," said Deborah, significantly, "what indeed? It may be police and it may be ghosts, but, ghosts or police, he never ses what he oughter say if he's a respectable man, which I sadly fear he ain't."

"He may have his reasons to –"

Miss Junk tossed her head and snorted again loudly. "Oh, yes – he has his reasons," she admitted, "and Old Bailey ones they are, I dessay. But there's somethin' 'anging over his head. Don't ask me what it is, fur never shall you know, by reason of my being ignorant. But whatever it is, Mr. Beecot, it's something wicked, and shall I see my own pretty in trouble?"

"How do you know there will be trouble?" interrupted Paul, anxiously.

"I've heard him pray," said Miss Junk, mysteriously – "yes, you may look, for there ain't no prayer in the crafty eye of him – but pray he do, and asks to be kept from danger –"

"Danger?"

"Danger's the word, for I won't deceive you, no, not if you paid me better wages than the old man do give and he's as near as the paring of an inion. So I ses to Bart, if there's danger and trouble and Old Baileys about, the sooner Miss Sylvia have some dear man to give her a decent name and pect her the more happy old Deborah will be. So I looked and looked for what you might call a fairy prince as I've heard tell of in pantomimes, and when you comes she loses her heart to you. So I ses, find out, Bart, what he is, and –"

"Yes, yes, I see. Well, Deborah, you can depend upon my looking after your pretty mistress. If I were only reconciled with my father I would speak to Mr. Norman."

"Don't, sir – don't!" cried the woman, fiercely, and making a clutch at Paul's arm; "he'll turn you out, he will, not being anxious fur anyone to have my flower, though love her as he oughter do,

he don't, no," cried Deborah, "nor her ma before her, who died with a starvin' 'eart. But you run away with my sweetest and make her your own, though her pa swears thunderbolts as you may say. Take her from this place of wickedness and police-courts." And Deborah looked round the cellar with a shudder. Suddenly she started and held up her finger, nodding towards a narrow door at the side of the cellar. "Master's footstep," she said in a harsh whisper. "I'd know it in a thousand – just like a thief's, ain't it? – stealing as you might say. Don't tell him you've seen me."

"But Sylvia," cried Paul, catching her dress as she passed him.

"Her you'll see, if I die for it," said Deborah, and whirled up the wooden steps in a silent manner surprising in so noisy a woman. Paul heard the trap-door drop with a stealthy creak.

As a key grated in the lock of the outside door he glanced round the place to which he had penetrated for the first time. It was of the same size as the shop overhead, but the walls were of stone, green with slime and feathery with a kind of ghastly white fungus. Overhead, from the wooden roof, which formed the floor of the shop, hung innumerable spider's webs thick with dust. The floor was of large flags cracked in many places, and between the chinks in moist corners sprouted sparse, colorless grass. In the centre was a deal table, scored with queer marks and splotted with ink. Over this flared two gas-jets, which whistled shrilly. Against the wall, which was below the street, were three green painted safes fast locked: but the opposite wall had in it the narrow door aforesaid, and a wide grated window, the bars of which were rusty, though strong. The atmosphere of the place was cold and musty and suggestive of a charnel house. Certainly a strange place in which to transact business, but everything about Aaron Norman was strange.

And he looked strange himself as he stepped in at the open door. Beyond, Paul could see the shallow flight of damp steps leading to the yard and the passage which gave admission from the street. Norman locked the door and came forward. He was as white as a sheet, and his face was thickly beaded with perspiration. His mouth twitched more than usual, and his hands moved nervously. Twice as he advanced towards Paul, who rose to receive him, did he cast the odd look over his shoulder. Beecot fancifully saw in him a man who had committed some crime and was fearful lest it should be discovered, or lest the avenger should suddenly appear. Deborah's confidential talk had not been without its effects on the young man, and Paul beheld in Aaron a being of mystery. How such a man came to have such a daughter as Sylvia, Paul could not guess.

"Here you are, Mr. Beecot," said Aaron, rubbing his hands as though the cold of the cellar struck to his bones. "Well?"

"I want to pawn a brooch," said Beecot, slipping his hand into his breast pocket.

"Wait," said Norman, throwing up his lean hand. "Let me tell you that I have taken a fancy to you, and I have watched you all the many times you have been here. Didn't you guess?"

"No," said Paul, wondering if he was about to speak of Sylvia, and concluding that he guessed what was in the wind.

"Well then, I have," said the pawnbroker, "and I think it's a pity a young man should pawn anything. Have you no money?" he asked.

Paul reddened. "Very little," he said.

"Little as it may be, live on that and don't pawn," said Aaron. "I speak against my own interests, but I like you, and perhaps I can lend you a few shillings."

"I take money from no one, thank you all the same," said Beecot, throwing back his head, "but if you can lend me something on this brooch," and he pulled out the case from his pocket. "A friend of mine would have bought it, but as it belongs to my mother I prefer to pawn it so that I may get it again when I am rich."

"Well, well," said Aaron, abruptly, and resuming his downcast looks, "I shall do what I can. Let me see it."

He stretched out his hand and took the case. Slowly opening it under the gas, he inspected its contents. Suddenly he gave a cry of alarm, and the case fell to the floor. "The Opal Serpent! – The

Opal Serpent!" he cried, growing purple in the face, "keep off! – keep off!" He beat the air with his lean hands. "Oh – the Opal!" and he fell face downward on the slimy floor in a fit or a faint, but certainly unconscious.

CHAPTER III

DULCINEA OF GWYNNE STREET

Near the Temple Station of the Metropolitan Railway is a small garden which contains a certain number of fairly-sized trees, a round band-stand, and a few flower-beds intersected by asphalt paths. Here those who are engaged in various offices round about come to enjoy *rus in urbes*, to listen to the gay music, and, in many cases, to eat a scanty mid-day meal. Old women come to sun themselves, loafers sit on the seats to rest, workmen smoke and children play. On a bright day the place is pretty, and those who frequent it feel as though they were enjoying a country holiday though but a stone's throw from the Thames. And lovers meet here also, so it was quite in keeping that Paul Beecot should wait by the bronze statues of the Herculaneum wrestlers for the coming of Sylvia.

On the previous day he had departed hastily, after committing the old man to Deborah's care. At first he had lingered to see Aaron revive, but when the unconscious man came to his senses and opened his eyes he fainted again when his gaze fell on Paul. Deborah, therefore, in her rough, practical way, suggested that as Beecot was "upsetting him" he had better go. It was in a state of perplexity that Paul had gone away, but he was cheered on his homeward way by a hasty assurance given by Miss Junk that Sylvia would meet him in the gardens, "near them niggers without clothes," said Deborah.

It was strange that the sight of the brooch should have produced such an effect on Aaron, and his fainting confirmed Paul's suspicions that the old man had not a clean conscience. But what the serpent brooch had to do with the matter Beecot could not conjecture. It was certainly an odd piece of jewellery, and not particularly pretty, but that the merest glimpse of it should make Norman faint was puzzling in the extreme.

"Apparently it is associated with something disagreeable in the man's mind," soliloquised Paul, pacing the pavement and keeping a sharp look-out for Sylvia, "perhaps with death, else the effect would scarcely have been so powerful as to produce a fainting fit. Yet Aaron can't know my mother. Hum! I wonder what it means."

While he was trying to solve the mystery a light touch on his arm made him wheel round, and he beheld Sylvia smiling at him. While he was looking along the Embankment for her coming she had slipped down Norfolk Street and through the gardens, to where the wrestlers clutched at empty air. In her low voice, which was the sweetest of all sounds to Paul, she explained this, looking into his dark eyes meanwhile. "But I can't stay long," finished Sylvia. "My father is still ill, and he wants me to return and nurse him."

"Has he explained why he fainted?" asked Paul, anxiously.

"No; he refuses to speak on the matter. Why did he faint, Paul?"

The young man looked puzzled. "Upon my word I don't know," he said. "Just as I was showing him a brooch I wished to pawn he went off."

"What kind of a brooch?" asked the girl, also perplexed.

Paul took the case out of his breast pocket, where it had been since the previous day. "My mother sent it to me," he explained; "you see she guesses that I am hard up, and, thanks to my father, she can't send me money. This piece of jewellery she has had for many years, but as it is rather old-fashioned she never wears it. So she sent it to me, hoping that I might get ten pounds or so on it. A friend of mine wished to buy it, but I was anxious to get it back again, so that I might return it to my mother. Therefore I thought your father might lend me money on it."

Sylvia examined the brooch with great attention. It was evidently of Indian workmanship, delicately chased, and thickly set with jewels. The serpent, which was apparently wriggling across the stout gold pin of the brooch, had its broad back studded with opals, large in the centre of the body and small at head and tail. These were set round with tiny diamonds, and the head was of chased gold

with a ruby tongue. Sylvia admired the workmanship and the jewels, and turned the brooch over. On the flat smooth gold underneath she found the initial "R" scratched with a pin. This she showed to Paul. "I expect your mother made this mark to identify the brooch," she said.

"My mother's name is Anne," replied Paul, looking more puzzled than ever, "Anne Beecot. Why should she mark this with an initial which has nothing to do with her name?"

"Perhaps it is a present," suggested Sylvia.

Paul snapped the case to, and replaced it in his pocket. "Perhaps it is," he said. "However, when I next write to my mother I'll ask her where she got the brooch. She has had it for many years," he added musingly, "for I remember playing with it when a small boy."

"Don't tell your mother that my father fainted."

"Why not? Does it matter?"

Sylvia folded her slender hands and looked straight in front of her. For some time they had been seated on a bench in a retired part of the gardens, and the laughter of playing children, the music of the band playing the merriest airs from the last musical comedy, came faintly to their ears. "I think it does matter," said the girl, seriously; "for some reason my father wants to keep himself as quiet as possible. He talks of going away."

"Going away. Oh, Sylvia, and you never told me."

"He only spoke of going away when I came to see how he was this morning," she replied. "I wonder if his fainting has anything to do with this determination. He never talked of going away before."

Paul wondered also. It seemed strange that after so unusual an event the old man should turn restless and wish to leave a place where he had lived for over twenty years. "I'll come and have an explanation," said Paul, after a pause.

"I think that will be best, dear. Father said that he would like to see you again, and told Bart to bring you in if he saw you."

"I'll call to-day – this afternoon, and perhaps your father will explain. And now, Sylvia, that is enough about other people and other things. Let us talk of ourselves."

Sylvia turned her face with a fond smile. She was a delicate and dainty little lady, with large grey eyes and soft brown hair. Her complexion was transparent, and she had little color in her cheeks. With her oval face, her thin nose and charming mouth she looked very pretty and sweet. But it was her expression that Paul loved. That was a trifle sad, but when she smiled her looks changed as an overcast sky changes when the sun bursts through the clouds. Her figure was perfect, her hands and feet showed marks of breeding, and although her grey dress was as demure as any worn by a Quakeress, she looked bright and merry in the sunshine of her lover's presence. Everything about Sylvia was dainty and neat and exquisitely clean: but she was hopelessly out of the fashion. It was this odd independence in her dress which constituted another charm in Paul's eyes.

The place was too public to indulge in love-making, and it was very tantalising to sit near this vision of beauty without gaining the delight of a kiss. Paul feasted his eyes, and held Sylvia's grey-gloved hand under cover of her dress. Further he could not go.

"But if you put up your sunshade," he suggested artfully.

"Paul!" That was all Sylvia said, but it suggested a whole volume of rebuke. Brought up in seclusion, like the princess in an enchanted castle, the girl was exceedingly shy. Paul's ardent looks and eager wooing startled her at times, and he thought disconsolately that his chivalrous love-making was coarse and common when he gazed on the delicate, dainty, shrinking maid he adored.

"You should not have stepped out of your missal, Sylvia," he said sadly.

"Whatever do you mean, dearest?"

"I mean that you are a saint – an angel – a thing to be adored and worshipped. You are exactly like one of those lovely creations one sees in mass-books of the Middle Ages. I fear, Sylvia," Paul sighed, "that you are too dainty and holy for this work-a-day world."

"What nonsense, Paul! I'm a poor girl without position or friends, living in a poor street. You are the first person who ever thought me pretty."

"You are not pretty," said the ardent Beecot, "you are divine – you are Beatrice – you are Elizabeth of Thuringia – you are everything that is lovely and adorable."

"And you are a silly boy," replied Sylvia, blushing, but loving this poetic talk all the same. "Do you want to put me in a glass case when we marry? If you do, I sha'n't become Mrs. Beecot. I want to see the world and to enjoy myself."

"Then other men will admire you and I shall grow jealous."

"Can you be jealous – Paul?"

"Horribly! You don't know half my bad qualities. I am poor and needy, and ambitious and jealous, and –"

"There – there. I won't hear you run yourself down. You are the best boy in the world."

"Poor world, if I am that," he laughed, and squeezed the little hand. "Oh, my love, do you really think of me?"

"Always! Always! You know I do. Why, ever since I saw you enter the shop six months ago I have always loved you. I told Debby, and Debby said that I could."

"Supposing Debby had said that you couldn't."

"Oh, she would never have said that. Why, Paul, she saw you."

The young man laughed and colored. "Do I carry my character in my face?" he asked. "Sylvia, don't think too well of me."

"That is impossible," she declared. "You are my fairy prince."

"Well, I certainly have found an enchanted princess sleeping in a jealously-guarded castle. What would your father say did he know?"

Sylvia looked startled. "I am afraid of my father," she replied, indirectly. "Yes – he is so strange. Sometimes he seems to love me, and at other times to hate me. We have nothing in common. I love books and art, and gaiety and dresses. But father only cares for jewels. He has a lot down in the cellar. I have never seen them, you know," added Sylvia, looking at her lover, "nor have Deborah or Bart. But they are there. Bart and Deborah say so."

"Has your father ever said so?"

"No. He won't speak of his business in the cellar. When the shop is closed at seven he sends Bart away home and locks Deborah and I in the house. That is," she explained anxiously, lest Paul should think her father a tyrant, "he locks the door which leads to the shop. We can walk over all the house. But there we stop till next morning, when father unlocks the door at seven and Bart takes down the shutters. We have lived like that for years. On Sunday evenings, however, father does not go to the cellar, but takes me to church. He has supper with me upstairs, and then locks the door at ten."

"But he sleeps upstairs?"

"No. He sleeps in the cellar."

"Impossible. There is no accommodation for sleeping there."

Sylvia explained. "There is another cellar – a smaller one – off the large place he has the safes in. The door is in a dark corner almost under the street line. This smaller cellar is fitted up as a bedroom, and my father has slept there all his life. I suppose he is afraid of his jewels being stolen. I don't think it is good for his health," added the girl, wisely, "for often in the morning he looks ill and his hands shake."

"Sylvia, does your father drink alcohol?"

"Oh, no, Paul! He is a teetotaler, and is very angry at those who drink to excess. Why, once Bart came to the shop a little drunk, and father would have discharged him but for Deborah."

Paul said nothing, but thought the more. Often it had struck him that Norman was a drunkard, though his face showed no signs of indulgence, for it always preserved its paleness. But the man's hands shook, and his skin often was drawn and tight, with that shiny look suggestive of indulgence.

"He either drinks or smokes opium," thought Paul on hearing Sylvia's denial. But he said nothing to her of this.

"I must go home now," she said, rising.

"Oh, no, not yet," he implored.

"Well, then, I'll stay for a few minutes longer, because I have something to say," she remarked, and sat down again. "Paul, do you think it is quite honorable for you and I to be engaged without the consent of my father?"

"Well," hesitated Beecot, "I don't think it is as it should be. Were I well off I should not fear to tell your father everything; but as I am a pauper he would forbid my seeing you did he learn that I had raised my eyes to you. But if you like I'll speak, though it may mean our parting for ever."

"Paul," she laid a firm, small hand on his arm, "not all the fathers in the world will keep me from you. Often I have intended to tell all, but my father is so strange. Sometimes he goes whole days without speaking to me, and at times he speaks harshly, though I do nothing to deserve rebuke. I am afraid of my father," said the girl, with a shiver. "I said so before, and I say so again. He is a strange man, and I don't understand him at all. I wish I could marry you and go away altogether."

"Well, let us marry if you like, though we will be poor."

"No," said Sylvia, sorrowfully; "after all, strange and harsh though my father is, he is still my father, and at times he is kind. I must stay with him to the end."

"What end?"

Sylvia shook her head still more sorrowfully. "Who knows? Paul, my father is afraid of dying suddenly."

"By violence?" asked Beecot, thinking of Deborah's talk.

"I can't say. But every day after six he goes to church and prays all alone. Deborah told me, as often she has seen him leave the church. Then he is afraid of every stranger who enters the shop. I don't understand it," cried the girl, passionately. "I don't like it. I wish you would marry me and take me away, Paul; but, oh, how selfish I am!"

"My own, I wish I could. But the money – "

"Oh, never mind the money. I must get away from that house. If it was not for Deborah I would be still more afraid. I often think my father is mad. But there," Sylvia rose and shook out her skirts, "I have no right to talk so, and only do so to you, that you may know what I feel. I'll speak to my father myself and say we are engaged. If he forbids our marriage I shall run away with you, Paul," said poor Sylvia, the tears in her eyes. "I am a bad girl to talk in this way. After all, he is my father."

Beecot had an ardent desire to take her in his arms and kiss away those tears, but the publicity of the meeting-place denied him the power to console her in that efficacious fashion. All he could do was to assure her of his love, and then they walked out of the gardens towards the Strand. "I'll speak to your father myself," said Paul; "we must end this necessary silence. After all, I am a gentleman, and I see no reason why your father should object."

"I know you are everything that is good and true," said Sylvia, drying her eyes. "If you were not Debby would not have let me become engaged to you," she finished childishly.

"Debby made inquiries about me," said Paul, laughing, to cheer her. "Yes! she sent Bart to Wargrove and found out all about me and my family and my respected father. She wished to be certain that I was a proper lover for her darling."

"I am your darling now," whispered Sylvia, squeezing his arm, "and you are the most charming lover in the world."

Paul was so enchanted with this speech that he would have defied public opinion by embracing her there and then, but Sylvia walked away rapidly down Gwynne Street and shook her head with a pursed-up mouth when Paul took a few steps after her. Recognizing that it would be wise not to follow her to the shop lest the suspicious old man should be looking out, Beecot went on his homeward way.

When he drew near his Bloomsbury garret he met Grexon Hay, who was sauntering along swinging his cane. "I was just looking for you," he said, greeting Paul in his usual self-contained manner; "it worries me to think you are so hard-up, though I'm not a fellow given to sentiment as a rule. Let me lend you a fiver."

Paul shook his head. "Thank you all the same."

"Well, then, sell me the brooch."

Beecot suddenly looked squarely at Hay, who met his gaze calmly. "Do you know anything of that brooch?" he asked.

"What do you mean? It is a brooch of Indian workmanship. That is all I know. I want to give a lady a present, and if you will sell it to me I'll take it, to help you, thus killing two birds at one shot."

"I don't want to sell it," said Paul, looking round. His eyes fell on a respectable man across the road, who appeared to be a workman, as he had a bag of tools on his shoulder. He was looking into a shop window, but also – as Paul suddenly thought – seemed to be observing him and Hay. However, the incident was not worth noticing, so he continued his speech to Grexon. "I tried to pawn it with Aaron Norman," he said.

"Well, what did you get on it?" asked Hay, with a yawn.

"Nothing. The old man fainted when I showed him the brooch. That is why I asked you if you know anything strange about the article."

Hay shook his head, but looked curiously at Beecot. "Do you know anything yourself?" he asked; "you seem to have something on your mind about that brooch."

"There is something queer about it," said Paul. "Why should Aaron Norman faint when he saw it?"

Hay yawned again. "You had better ask your one-eyed friend – I think you said he was one-eyed."

"He is, and a frightened sort of man. But there's nothing about that opal serpent to make him faint."

"Perhaps he did so because it is in the shape of a serpent," suggested Grexon; "a constitutional failing, perhaps. Some people hate cats and other fluttering birds. Your one-eyed friend may have a loathing of snakes and can't bear to see the representation of one."

"It might be that," said Beecot, after a pause. "Aaron is a strange sort of chap. A man with a past, I should say."

"You make me curious," said Grexon, laughing in a bored manner. "I think I'll go to the shop myself and have a look at him."

"Come with me when I next go," said Paul. "I had intended to call this afternoon; but I won't, until I hear from my mother."

"What about?"

"I want to learn how she came into possession of the brooch."

"Pooh, nonsense," said Hay, contemptuously, "you think too much about the thing. Who cares if a pawnbroker faints? Why I wish to go to the shop, is, because I am anxious to see your lady-love. Well, when you do want me to go, send for me; you have my address. 'Day, old man," and the gorgeous being sauntered away, with apparently not a care in the world to render him anxious.

Paul was anxious, however. The more he thought of the episode of the brooch the stranger it seemed, and Sylvia's talk of her father's queer habits did not make Paul wonder the less. However, he resolved to write to his mother, and was just mounting his stairs to do so when he heard a "Beg pardon, sir," and beheld the working man, bag of tools, pipe and all.

"Beg pardon, sir," said the man, civilly, "but that gentleman you was a-talking to. Know his name, sir?"

"What the devil's that to you?" asked Paul, angrily.

"Nothing, sir, only he owes me a little bill."

"Go and ask him for it then."

"I don't know his address, sir."

"Oh, be hanged!" Paul went on, when the man spoke again.

"He's what I call a man on the market, sir. Have a care," and he departed quickly.

Paul stared. What did the working man mean, and was he a working man?

CHAPTER IV

THE UNFORESEEN

Paul did not go near the Gwynne Street shop for the next few days, much as he wanted to do so. Being deeply in love he could hardly bear to be away from Sylvia even for a few hours: but in spite of this he remained away for two reasons. The first of these was that he awaited a reply to his letter written to Mrs. Beecot, as he wished to be able to tell Aaron Norman where the brooch had been obtained. He thought by doing this to ingratiate himself with the old man, and perhaps, if thus confidential, might learn, for the satisfaction of his curiosity, why the sight of the brooch had produced such an effect on the pawnbroker.

The other reason was that, not having been able to sell the brooch, or rather pawn it since he did not wish to lose it altogether, funds were running low, and now he had but a few shillings left. A call at the office of a penny weekly had resulted in the return of three stories as being too long and not the sort required. But the editor, in a hasty interview, admitted that he liked Paul's work and would give him three pounds for a tale written on certain lines likely to be popular with the public. Paul did not care to set forth another person's ideas, especially as these were old and very sensational; but as he required money he set to work and labored to produce what would bring him in the cash. He made several attempts before he reached the editor's level, which was low rather than high, and succeeded in getting the tale accepted. With three golden pounds in his pocket and exultation in his heart – for every success seemed to bring him nearer to Sylvia – Paul returned to his aerial castle and found waiting for him the expected letter.

It was written in a low-spirited sort of way, characteristic of Mrs. Beecot, but with a true motherly heart. After two pages of lamentation over his absence, and a description of how the head of the household managed to bear up against the affliction of his son's absence, Mrs. Beecot proceeded to explain about the brooch.

"Why do you ask me about the opal brooch, my dear boy?" wrote Mrs. Beecot in her scratchy handwriting. "All I know is that your father bought it out of a pawnbroker's shop in Stowley, which is some town in the Midlands. Your father was travelling there and saw the brooch by chance. As I always thought opals unlucky he was anxious to make me see the folly of such a superstition, so he bought the brooch and took it away with him. Afterwards, I believe, he received a letter from the pawnbroker, saying that his assistant had sold the brooch by mistake, that the time for redeeming it had not run out when your father bought it. The pawnbroker asked that the brooch might be returned, and wanted to pay back the money. But you know what your father is. He refused at once to give back the brooch, and insisted on my wearing it. I had a bad fall while wearing it, and then was thrown out of that high dog-cart your father would insist on driving. I am sure the brooch or the stones is unlucky, and, as after a time your father forgot all about it, I let it lie in my jewel-case. For years I had not worn it, and as I think it is unlucky, and as you need money, my darling boy, I hope you will sell it. There is no need to pawn it as you say. I never want to see the brooch again. But regarding your health, etc., etc."

So Mrs. Beecot wrote in her verbose style, and with some errors of grammar. Paul saw in her simple tale fresh evidence of his father's tyranny, since he made his wife wear gems she detested and was superstitiously set against possessing them. The dog-cart episode Paul remembered very well. Mr. Beecot, in his amiable way, had no patience with his wife's nerves, and never lost an opportunity of placing her in unpleasant positions, whereby she might be, what he called, hardened. Paul sighed to think of his mother's position as he folded up the letter. She had a bad time with the truculent husband she had married. "And I can't believe she became his wife of her own free will," thought Paul; "probably the governor bullied her into it in his own sweet way."

However, there was nothing in the letter to explain Norman's faint. It was certainly strange that the pawnbroker, from whom the brooch had been originally purchased, should have demanded it back; and the excuse given seems rather a weak one. However, Paul did not waste time in thinking over this, but resolved to tell Aaron what his mother had said.

He had received two letters from Sylvia, mentioning, amongst other things, that her father, now quite well, was asking after Paul, and urging him to come and see him. "My father appears to have a fancy for you," wrote Sylvia, "so if you are very nice – as nice as you can be – perhaps he won't be very angry if you tell him we are engaged." There was much more to the same effect, which Paul thought good advice, and he intended to adopt the same. It was necessary that he should tell Aaron of his love if things were to be conducted in a straightforward and honorable manner. And Paul had no desire to conduct them otherwise.

Having made up his mind to see Aaron again, Paul bethought himself of Grexon Hay. That gentleman had never appeared again at the Bloomsbury garret, and had never even written. But Paul was anxious that Hay – whom he regarded as a clever man-of-the-world – should see the old man, and, as our trans-Atlantic cousins say, "size him up." Norman's manner and queer life puzzled Paul not a little, and not being very worldly himself he was anxious to have the advice of his old school friend, who seemed desirous of doing him a good turn, witness his desire to buy the brooch so that Paul might be supplied with money. So Beecot wrote to Grexon Hay at his Camden Hill chamber and told him he intended to go to Gwynne Street on a certain day at a certain time. To this Grexon responded by saying that he was at Paul's service and would come especially as he wanted to see Dulcinea of Gwynne Street.

Paul laughed at the phrase. "I suppose Grexon thinks I am very Quixotic," he thought, "coming to London to tilt with the windmills of the Press. But Don Quixote was wise in spite of his apparent madness, and Grexon will recognize my wisdom when he sees my Dulcinea, bless her! Humph! I wonder if Hay could pacify my father and make him look more kindly on my ambitions. Grexon is a clever fellow, a thoroughly good chap, so – "

Here Paul paused to think. The incident of the working man and the warning he had given about Hay recurred to his mind. Also the phrase "Man on the Market" stuck in his memory. Why should Grexon Hay be called so, and what did the phrase mean? Paul had never heard it before. Moreover, from certain indications Beecot did not think that the individual with the bag of tools was a working man. He rather appeared to be a person got up to play the part. The fellow watching them both and accosting Paul alone certainly seemed a doubtful character. Beecot regretted that he had been so short with the man, else he might have learned why he had acted in this way. The story of the little bill was absurd, for if Grexon owed the man money the man himself would certainly have known the name and address of his creditor. Altogether, the incident puzzled Paul almost as much as that of Aaron's fainting, and he resolved to question Grexon. But it never crossed his mind that Hay was anything else but what he appeared to be – a man-about-town with a sufficient income to live upon comfortably. Had Paul doubted he would never have asked Grexon to go with him to Gwynne Street. However, he had done so, and the appointment was made, so there was no more to be said.

The man-about-town duly made his appearance to the very minute. "I always keep appointments," he explained when Paul congratulated him on his punctuality; "there's nothing annoys me so much as to be kept waiting, so I invariably practise what I preach. Well, Paul, and how is Dulcinea of Gwynne Street?"

"She is very well," replied Paul, who was still a young enough lover to blush, "but I have not seen her since we last met. I waited for a letter from my mother about the brooch, so that I might explain to Aaron how she got it. The old man has been asking after me."

"Oh, confound the brooch!" said Grexon in his cool manner. "I don't want to hear about it. Let us talk of Dulcinea."

"Rather let us talk of yourself," said Paul.

"Not an interesting subject," replied Hay, rising as Paul opened his garret door for departure, "you know all about me."

"No! I don't know why you are called a man-on-the-market."

Hay flushed and turned sharply. "What do you mean?" he asked in a particularly quiet tone.

"I don't know what I *do* mean," said Paul. "Do you remember that working man with the bag of tools who was across the road when we last conversed?"

"No," said Hay, staring, "I never notice creatures of that class. Why?"

"Because he asked me who you were and where you lived. It seems you owe him some money."

"That is very probable," said Hay, equably. "I owe most people money, and if this man has a debt against me he would certainly know all about me as to address and name."

"So I thought," replied Paul, "but the queer thing is that he told me to take care, and called you a man-on-the-market. What does it mean? I never heard the phrase before."

"I have," said Hay, proceeding calmly down the somewhat steep stairs; "a man-on-the-market means one who wants to marry and is eligible for any heiress who comes along with a sufficient rent-roll. But why should a fellow like that talk the shibboleth of Society?"

Paul shrugged his shoulders. "I can't say. Perhaps the man guessed I intended to take you to see Sylvia, and warned me against you, as it seems from his phrase that you wish to marry."

"Ah! Then your Dulcinea is an heiress?" said Hay, fixing his eye-glass carefully; "if so, you needn't fear me. I am almost engaged and won't be on the market any longer. What confounded cheek this fellow addressing you in that way and talking of me as he did. I suppose," he added with a cold laugh, "it is not necessary for me to defend myself."

"What rubbish," replied Beecot, good-naturedly. "All the same, it is strange the man should have spoken to me as he did. I told him to go to the devil."

"And go to the devil he assuredly will if I meet him," was the dry reply. "I'll break his head for not minding his own business. I think I can explain, and will do so as soon as you take that telegram the lad is holding out for you."

Grexon was quicker-sighted than Paul, for the moment they arrived at the bottom of the stairs and were about to emerge into the street he saw the messenger. "Do you know if any gent of that name lives here, guv'nor?" asked the boy, holding out the buff-colored envelope.

Beecot, to his surprise, saw his own name. "Who can be wiring to me?" he said, taking the telegram. "Wait, boy, there may be an answer," and he skimmed through the lines. "Don't sell the brooch, but send it back," read Paul, puzzled, "your father angry. – Mother." He paused, and looked at the boy. "Got a form?" he asked.

The lad produced one and a stumpy pencil. With these materials Beecot wrote a reply saying the brooch would be returned on the morrow. When the boy went away with the answer Paul felt in his breast pocket and took out the old blue case. "I've a good mind to send it now," he said aloud.

"What's that?" asked Hay, who was yawning at the door. "No bad news I hope?"

"It's about that brooch again."

Hay laughed. "Upon my word it seems to you what the Monster was to Frankenstein," said he. "Send it back – to Mrs. Beecot, I presume – and have done with it." He cast a glance at the case. "I see you have it with you," he ended, lightly.

"Yes," said Paul, and replacing the case in his pocket went down the street with his friend. Then he determined to ask his opinion, and related the gist of Mrs. Beecot's letter. "And now the mater wires to have it back," he said. "I expect my father has found out that she has sent it to me, and is furious."

"Well, send it back and have done with it," said Hay, impatiently; "you are in danger of becoming a bore with that brooch, Beecot. I'll lend you money if you like."

"No, thanks, I have three pounds honestly earned. However, we'll speak no more of the brooch. I'll send it back this very day. Tell me," he linked his arm within that of his friend, "tell me of that man."

"That man – of the working creature," said Hay, absently. "Pooh, the man was no more a working man than I am."

"Well, I thought myself he was a bit of a fraud."

"Detectives never do make up well," said Grexon, calmly.

Paul stopped as they turned into Oxford Street. "What? Was the man a detective?"

"I think so, from your description of his conversation. The fact is I'm in love with a lady who is married. We have behaved quite well, and no one can say a word against us. But her husband is a beast and wants a divorce. I have suspected for some time that he is having me watched. Thanks to you, Paul, I am now sure. So perhaps you will understand why the man warned you against me and talked of my being a man-on-the-market."

"I see," said Paul, hesitating; "but don't get into trouble, Hay."

"Oh, I'm all right. And I don't intend to do anything dishonorable, if that is what you mean. It's the husband's fault, not mine. By the way, can you describe the fellow?"

"Yes. He had red hair and a red beard – rather a ruddy face, and walked with a limp."

"All put on," said Hay, contemptuously; "probably the limp was affected, the beard false, the hair a wig, and the face rouged – very clumsy indeed. I daresay he'll appear pale and gentlemanly the next time he watches me. I know the tricks of these fellows."

The two friends talked for some time about this episode, and then branched off into other subjects. Hay described the married lady he adored, and Paul rebuked him for entertaining such a passion. "It's not right, Hay," said he, positively; "you can't respect a woman who runs away from her husband."

"She hasn't run away yet, Sir Galahad," laughed Grexon. "By Jove, you are an innocent!"

"If that means respecting the institution of marriage and adoring women as angels I hope I'll remain an innocent."

"Oh, women are angels, of course," said Hay as they walked down Gwynne Street; "it's a stock phrase in love-making. But there are angels of two sorts. Dulcinea is –"

"Here we are," interrupted Paul, quickly. Somehow it irritated him to hear this hardened sinner speak of Sylvia, and he began to think that Grexon Hay had deteriorated. Not that he was considered to be particularly good at Torrington school. In fact, Paul remembered that he had been thoroughly disliked. However, he had no time to go into the matter, for at this moment Aaron appeared at the door of the shop. He stepped out on to the pavement as Paul approached. "Come in," he said, "I want to see you – privately," he added, casting a frightened look at Hay.

"In that case I'll leave you," said Grexon, disengaging his arm from Paul. "Dulcinea must wait for another occasion. Go in and do your business. I'll wait without."

Paul thanked his friend by a look and went into the shop with the old man. "That brooch," said Aaron, in a timid whisper, "have you got it? Give it to me – quick – quick."

There was no one in the shop as Bart had apparently gone out on an errand. The door leading to the stairs, down which Sylvia had so often descended, was closed, and no one was about to overhear their conversation. "I have the brooch," said Paul, "but –"

"Give it to me – give it," panted Aaron. "I'll buy it – at a large price. Ask what you want."

"Why are you so eager to get it?" demanded Beecot, astonished.

"That's my business," said Norman, in a suddenly imperious manner. "I want it. The stones take my fancy," he ended weakly.

"Was that why you fainted?" asked Paul, suspiciously.

"No." The man grew white and leaned against the counter, breathing heavily. "Where did you get the brooch?" he asked, trying to keep himself calm, but with a visible effort.

"I got it from my mother, and she received it from my father – "

"Beecot – Beecot," said the old man, fingering his lips, much agitated. "I know no one of that name save yourself, and you are not a spy – a scoundrel – a – a – " He caught the eyes of Paul fixed on him in amazement, and suddenly changed his tone. "Excuse me, but the brooch reminds me of trouble."

"You have seen it before?"

"Yes – that is no – don't ask me." He clutched at his throat as though he felt choked. "I can't talk of it. I daren't. How did your father get it?"

More and more astonished, Paul explained. Aaron listened with his one eye very bright, and made uneasy motions with his lean hands as the young man spoke. When Beecot ended he bit his nails. "Yes, yes," he murmured to himself, "it would be asked for back. But it sha'n't go back. I want it. Sell it to me, Mr. Beecot."

"I'm sorry I can't," replied Paul, good-naturedly. "But my mother wired that it was to be returned. My father has discovered that she sent it to me and is not pleased."

"Did you tell your mother you had shown it to me?"

"No. There was no need."

"God bless you!" breathed the man, pulling out a crimson handkerchief. "Of course there was no need," he tittered nervously. "It doesn't do to talk of pawning things – not respectable, eh – eh." He wiped his face and passed his tongue over his white lips. "Well, you won't sell it to me?"

"I can't. But I'll ask my mother if she will."

"No, no! Don't do that – say nothing – say nothing. I don't want the brooch. I never saw the brooch – what brooch – pooh – pooh, don't talk to me of the brooch," and so he babbled on.

"Mr. Norman," said Beecot, gravely, "what is the story connected with the brooch?"

Aaron flung up his hands and backed towards the counter. "No, no. Don't ask me. What do you mean? I know no story of a brooch – what brooch – I never saw one – I never – ah" – he broke off in relief as two pale-faced, spectacled girls entered the shop – "customers. What is it, ladies? How can I serve you?" And he bustled away behind the counter, giving all his attention to the customers, yet not without a sidelong look in the direction of the perplexed Paul.

That young gentleman, finding it impossible to get further speech with Aaron, and suspecting from his manner that all was not right, left the shop. He determined to take the brooch to Wargrove himself, and to ask his mother about it. Then he could learn why she wanted it back – if not from her, then from his father. This knowledge might explain the mystery.

"Did you sell the brooch?" asked Grexon as they walked up Gwynne Street.

"No. I have to send it back to my mother, and – "

"Hold on!" cried Hay, stumbling. "Orange-peel – ah – "

His stumble knocked Paul into the middle of the road. A motor car was coming down swiftly. Before Hay could realize what had taken place Paul was under the wheels of the machine.

CHAPTER V

TROUBLE

"Oh, Debby," wept Sylvia, "he will die – he will die."

"Not he, my precious pet," said the handmaiden, fondling the girl's soft hands within her own hard ones. "Them sort of young men have as many lives as tom cats. Bless you, my flower, he'll be up and ready, waiting at the altar, before the fashions change – and that's quick enough," added Deborah, rubbing her snub nose. "For they're allays an-altering and a-turning and a-changing of 'em."

The two were in the sitting-room over the bookshop. It was a low-ceilinged apartment, long and narrow, with windows back and front, as it extended the whole depth of the house. The back windows looked out on the dingy little yard, but these Norman had filled in with stained glass of a dark color, so that no one could see clearly out of them. Why he had done so was a mystery to Sylvia, though Deborah suspected the old man did not want anyone to see the many people who came to the back steps after seven. From the front windows could be seen the street and the opposite houses, and on the sills of the windows Sylvia cultivated a few cheap flowers, which were her delight. The room was furnished with all manner of odds and ends, flotsam and jetsam of innumerable sales attended by Aaron. There were Japanese screens, Empire sofas, mahogany chairs, Persian praying mats, Louis Quatorz tables, Arabic tiles, Worcester china, an antique piano that might have come out of the ark, and many other things of epochs which had passed away. Sylvia herself bloomed like a fair flower amidst this wreckage of former times.

But the flower drooped at this moment and seemed in danger of dying for lack of sunshine. That, indeed, had been taken away by the removal of the young lover. Bart, who had witnessed the accident, returned hastily to tell Sylvia, and so great had the shock of the dreadful news been, that she had fainted, whereupon the foolish shopman had been severely dealt with by Deborah. When Sylvia recovered, however, she insisted upon seeing Bart again, and then learned that Paul had been taken to Charing Cross Hospital.

"They drawed him from under the wheels, miss, as white as a vellum binding as ain't bin used. That gent as he was a-walking arm-in-arm with, slipped and knocked Mr. Beecot spinning under the steam engine." So did Bart describe the latest triumph of civilisation. "He was that sorry, in a cold-blooded way, as I never saw. He helped to git Mr. Beecot into a cab and druve off. Then I come to tell you."

"And a nice way you've told it," grunted Deborah, driving him to the door. "Get back to the shop, you threadpaper of a man. My husband shall never be such a fool. The engagement's off."

"Oh, Debby!" whimpered Bart, who, strange to say, was fondly attached to the stout servant. But that may have been habit.

"Get along with you," she said, and banged the door in his face. "And don't tell master," she bawled after him, "else he'll be fainting again, drat him for a lily-livered duck!"

So Aaron never knew that the man who possessed the brooch had been run over by a motor or was in the hospital. Sylvia and Deborah both tried to look as cheerful as possible, and schemed how to see the lover who had thus been laid low. Deborah boldly announced that she was taking Sylvia to buy her a new dress – that is, to choose it, for the cost was to be paid out of the servant's wages – and went with her one afternoon to the hospital. They heard that Paul's arm was broken, and that he had been slightly hurt about the head. But there was no danger of his dying, and although they were not allowed to see him the two women returned greatly cheered. But Sylvia frequently gave way to low spirits, thinking that at any moment the good symptoms might give way to bad ones. Deborah always cheered her, and went daily to get news. Always she returned to say, "He's a-goin' on nicely, and has that color as he might be a sunset." So Sylvia was bright until her next fit of low spirits came.

Meanwhile, their attention was taken up by the odd behavior of Aaron. The old man suddenly announced that he was about to sell the shop and retire, and displayed a feverish haste in getting rid of his stock, even at a low price. Whether he sold the jewels so cheap as the books no one ever knew; but certainly the pundit caste did well out of the sale. Within the week the shop below was denuded, and there were nothing but bare shelves, much to the disgust of Bart, who, like Othello, found his occupation gone. The next day the furniture was to be sold, and when Deborah was comforting Sylvia at the week's end the fiat had already gone forth. Whither he intended to transfer his household the old man did not say, and this, in particular, was the cause of Sylvia's grief. She dreaded lest she should see her lover no more. This she said to Deborah.

"See him you shall, and this very day," cried the maiden, cheerfully. "Why, there's that dress. I can't make up my mind whether to have magenter or liliac, both being suited to my complexion. Not that it's cream of the valley smother in rosebuds as yours is, my angel, but a dress I must have, and your pa can't deny my taking you to choose."

"But, Debby, it seems wrong to deceive father in this way."

"It do," admitted Debby, "and it is. We'll speak this very night – you and me in duets, as you might say, my pretty. He sha'n't say as we've gone to hide behind a hedge."

"But we have, Debby, for six months," said Sylvia.

"Because I'm a hardened and bold creature," said Deborah, fiercely, "so don't say it's you as held your tongue, for that you didn't, my honeycomb. Many and many a time have you said to me, ses you, 'Oh, do tell my par,' and many a time have I said to you, ses I, 'No, my precious, not for Joseph,' whoever he may be, drat him!"

"Now, Debby, you're taking all the blame on yourself!"

"And who have the broader shoulders, you or me, my flower?" asked Debby, fondly. "I'm as wicked as Bart, and that's saying much, for the way he bolts his food is dreadful to think of. Never will I have a corkidile for a husband. But here," cried Deborah, beginning to bustle, "it's the dress I'm thinking of. Magenter or lilacs in full boom. What do you think, my honey-pot?"

So the end of Deborah's shameless diplomacy was, that the two went, not to the inferior draper's where Debby bought her extraordinary garments – though they went there later in a Jesuitical manner – but to the hospital, where to her joy Sylvia was allowed to see Paul. He looked thin and pale, but was quite himself and very cheerful. "My darling," he said, kissing Sylvia's hand, while Debby sat bolt upright near the bed, with a large handbag, and played propriety by glaring. "Now I shall get well quickly. The sight of you is better than all medicine."

"I should think so," sniffed Debby, graciously. "Where's your orchards, with sich a color."

"You mean orchids, Debby," laughed Sylvia, who blushed a rosy red.

"It's them things with lady slippers a size too large for your foot I'm a-thinking of, pet, and small it is enough for glarse boots as the fairy story do tell. But I'm a-taking up the precious time of billing and cooing, so I'll shut my mouth and my ears while you let loose your affections, my sweet ones, if you'll excuse the liberty, sir, me being as fond of my lovey there as you is your own self."

"No, I can't admit that," said Paul, kissing Sylvia's hand again and holding it while he talked. "Darling, how good of you to come and see me."

"It may be for the last time, Paul," said Sylvia, trying to keep back her tears, "but you'll give me your address, and I'll write."

"Oh, Sylvia, what is it?"

"My father has sold the books and is selling the house. We are going away. Where to I don't know."

"Tumbucktook would suit him," snapped Debby, suddenly; "he's trying to get into some rabbit-hole. Why, I don't know."

"I do," said Paul, lying back thoughtfully. He guessed that Aaron was moving because of the brooch, though why he should do so was a mystery. "Sylvia," he asked, "did your father see my accident?"

"No, Paul. He was busy in the shop. Bart saw it, but Debby said he wasn't to tell father."

"Because of the fainting," explained Debby; "the man ain't strong, though Sampson he may think himself – ah, and Goliath, too, for all I care. But why ask, Mr. Beecot?"

Paul did not reply to her, but asked Sylvia another question. "Do you remember that opal brooch I showed you?"

"The serpent. Yes?"

"Well, it's lost."

"Lost, Paul?"

The young man nodded mournfully. "I'm very vexed about it," he said in a low tone; "my mother wanted it back. I was going to send it that very day, but when I met with the accident it got lost somehow. It wasn't in my pocket when my clothes were examined, though I asked for it as soon as I became conscious. My friend also couldn't tell me."

"Him as caused the smashes," said Deborah, with several sniffs. "A nice pretty friend, I do say, sir."

"It wasn't his fault, Deborah. Mr. Hay stumbled on a piece of orange peel and jostled against me. I was taken by surprise, and fell into the middle of the road just as the motor came along. Mr. Hay was more than sorry and has come to see me every day with books and fruit and all manner of things."

"The least he could do," snapped the servant, "knocking folks into orspitals with his fine gent airs. I sawr him out of the winder while you was in the shop, and there he spoke law-de-daw to a brat of a boy as ought to be in gaol, seeing he smoked a cigar stump an' him but a ten-year-old guttersnipe. Ses I, oh, a painted maypole you is, I ses, with a face as hard as bath bricks. A bad un you are, ses I."

"No, Deborah, you are wrong. Mr. Hay is my friend."

"Never shall he be my pretty's friend," declared Debby, obstinately, "for if all the wickedness in him 'ud come out in his face, pimples would be as thick as smuts in a London fog. No, Mr. Beecot, call him not what you do call him, meaning friend, for Judas and Julius Cezar ain't in it with his Belzebubness."

Beecot saw it was vain to stop this chatterer, so he turned to talk in whispers to Sylvia, while Debby murmured on like a brook, only she spoke loud enough at times to drown the whispering of the lovers.

"Sylvia," said Paul, softly, "I want you to send your father to me."

"Yes, Paul. Why do you wish to see him?"

"Because he must be told of our love. I don't think he will be so hard as you think, and I am ashamed of not having told him before. I like to act honorably, and I fear, Sylvia darling, we have not been quite fair to your father."

"I think so, too, Paul, and I intended to speak when we went home. But give me your address, so that if we go away unexpectedly I'll be able to write to you."

Beecot gave her his Bloomsbury address, and also that of his old home at Wargrove in Essex. "Write care of my mother," he said, "and then my father won't get the letter."

"Would he be angry if he knew?" asked the girl, timidly.

Paul laughed to himself at the thought of the turkey-cock's rage. "I think he would, dearest," said he, "but that does not matter. Be true to me and I'll be true to you."

Here the nurse came to turn the visitors away on the plea that Paul had talked quite enough. Debby flared up, but became meek when Sylvia lifted a reproving finger. Then Paul asked Debby to seek his Bloomsbury lodgings and bring to him any letters that might be waiting for him. "I expect to hear from my mother, and must write and tell her of my accident," said he. "I don't want to trouble Mr. Hay, but you, Debby –"

"Bless you, Mr. Beecot, it ain't no trouble," said the servant, cheerfully, "and better me nor that 'aughty peacock, as ain't to be trusted, say what you will, seeing criminals is a-looking out of his eyes, hide one though he may with a piece of glarse, and I ses – "

"You must go now, please," interposed the nurse.

"Oh, thank you, ma'am, but my own mistress, as is a lady, do I obey only."

"Debby, Debby," murmured Sylvia, and after kissing Paul, a farewell which Debby strove to hide from the nurse by getting in front of her and blocking the view, the two departed. The nurse laughed as she arranged Paul's pillows.

"What a strange woman, Mr. Beecot."

"Very," assented Paul, "quite a character, and as true as the needle of the compass."

Meanwhile, Debby, ignorant of this flattering description, conducted Sylvia to the draper's shop, and finally fixed on a hideous magenta gown, which she ordered to be made quite plain. "With none of your fal-de-lals," commanded Miss Junk, snorting. "Plain sewing and good stuff is all I arsk for. And if there's any left over you can send home a 'at of the same, which I can brighten with a cockes feather as my mar wore at her wedding. There, my own," added Debby, as they emerged from the shop and took a 'bus to Gwynne Street, "that's as you'll allways see me dressed – plain and 'omely, with no more trimmings than you'll see on a washing-day jint, as I know to my cost from my mar's ecomicals."

"Economy, Debby."

"It ain't fur me to be using fine words, Miss Sylvia; cockatoos' feathers on a goose they'd be in my mouth. The 'ole dixionary kin do for you my flower, but pothooks and 'angers never was my loves, me having been at the wash-tub when rising eight, and stout at that."

In this way Debby discoursed all the way home. On arriving in the room over the shop they found themselves confronted by Aaron, who looked less timid than usual, and glowered at the pair angrily. "Where have you been, Sylvia?" he asked.

The girl could not tell a direct lie, and looked at Debby. That handmaiden, less scrupulous, was about to blurt forth a garbled account, when Sylvia stopped her with a resolute expression on her pretty face. "No, Debby," she commanded, "let me speak. Father, I have been to see Mr. Beecot at the Charing Cross Hospital."

"And you couldn't have my flower do less as a good Smart 'un," put in Debby, anxiously, so as to avert the storm. "Girls is girls whatever you may think, sir, of them being dolls and dummies and – "

"Hold your tongue, woman," cried Norman, fiercely, "let me talk. Why is Mr. Beecot in the hospital?"

"He was knocked down," said Sylvia, quietly, "and his arm is broken. A motor car ran over him in Gwynne Street. He wants to see you, to tell you that he lost something."

Norman turned even whiter than he was by nature, and the perspiration suddenly beaded his bald forehead. "The opal serpent!" he cried.

"Yes – the brooch he showed me."

"He showed you!" cried Aaron, with a groan. "And what did he tell you about it? – what – what – what – the truth or – " He became passionate.

Debby grasped Aaron's arm and whirled him into the middle of the room like a feather. Then she planted herself before Sylvia, with her arms akimbo, and glared like a lioness. "You can pinch me, sir, or gives me black eyes and red noses if you like, but no finger on my precious, if I die for it."

Aaron was staggered by this defiance, and looked fierce for the moment. Then he became timid again and cast the odd, anxious look over his shoulder. "Leave the room, Deborah," he said in a mild voice.

The faithful maid replied by sitting down and folding her arms. "Get your wild horses, sir," she said, breathing heavily, "for only by them will I be tugged away." And she snorted so loudly that the room shook.

"Pshaw," said Norman, crossly, "Sylvia, don't be afraid of me." He wiped his face nervously. "I only want to know of the brooch. I like the opals – I wanted to buy it from Mr. Beecot. He is poor – he wants money. I can give it to him, for – the – the brooch."

He brought out the last word with a gasp, and again glanced over his shoulder. Sylvia, not at all afraid, approached and took the old man's hand. The watchful Deborah moved her chair an inch nearer, so as to be ready for any emergency. "Dear father," said the girl, "Mr. Beecot doesn't know where the brooch is. It was stolen from him when the accident happened. If you will see him he can tell you – "

"Not where the brooch is," interrupted Aaron, trying to appear calm. "Well, well, it doesn't matter." He glanced anxiously at Sylvia. "You believe me, child, when I say it doesn't matter."

A snort from Deborah plainly said that she had her doubts. Sylvia cast a reproving glance in her direction, whereupon she rose and committed perjury. "Of course it don't matter, sir," she said in a loud, hearty voice which made Aaron wince. "My precious believes you, though lie it might be. But folk so good as you, sir, who go to church when there ain't anyone to see, wouldn't tell lies without them a-choking of them in their blessed throats."

"How do you know I go to church?" asked Norman, with the snarl of a trapped animal.

"Bless you, sir, I don't need glases at my age, though not so young as I might be. Church you enjiy, say what you may, you being as regular as the taxes, which is saying much. Lor' save us all!"

Deborah might well exclaim this. Her master flung himself forward with outstretched hands clawing the air, and with his lips lifted like those of an enraged dog. "You she-cat," he said in a painfully hissing voice, "you're a spy, are you? They've set you to watch – to drag me to the gallows – " he broke off with a shiver. His rage cooled as suddenly as it had heated, and staggering to the sofa he sat down with his face hidden. "Not that – not that – oh, the years of pain and terror! To come to this – to this – Deborah – don't sell me. Don't. I'll give you money – I am rich. But if the opal serpent – if the opal – " He rose and began to beat the air with his hands.

Sylvia, who had never seen her father like this, shrank back in terror, but Deborah, with all her wits about her, though she was wildly astonished, seized a carafe of water from the table and dashed the contents in his face. The old man gasped, shuddered, and, dripping wet, sank again on the sofa. But the approaching fit was past, and when he looked up after a moment or so, his voice was as calm as his face. "What's all this?" he asked, feebly.

"Nothing, father," said Sylvia, kneeling beside him; "you must not doubt Debby, who is as true as steel."

"Are you, Deborah?" asked Aaron, weakly.

"I should think so," she declared, putting her arms round Sylvia, "so long, sir, as you don't hurt my flower."

"I don't want to hurt her ..."

"There's feelings as well as bones," said Deborah, hugging Sylvia so as to keep her from speaking, "and love you can't squash, try as you may, though, bless you, I'm not given to keeping company myself."

"Love," said Aaron, vacantly. He seemed to think more of his troubles than of Sylvia going to visit a young man.

"Love and Mr. Beecot," said Deborah. "She wants to marry him."

"Why, then," said Aaron, calmly, "she shall marry him."

Sylvia fell at his feet. "Oh, father – father, and I have kept it from you all these months. Forgive me – forgive me," and she wept.

"My dear," he said, gently raising her, "there is nothing to forgive."

CHAPTER VI

A NOISE IN THE NIGHT

Both Deborah and Sylvia were astonished that Aaron should be so indifferent about their long concealment. They had expected and dreaded a storm, yet when the secret was told Mr. Norman appeared to take it as calmly as though he had known about the matter from the first. Indeed, he seemed perfectly indifferent, and when he raised Sylvia and made her sit beside him on the sofa he reverted to the brooch.

"I shall certainly see Mr. Beecot," he said in a dreamy way. "Charing Cross Hospital – of course. I'll go to-morrow. I had intended to see about selling the furniture then, but I'll wait till the next day. I want the brooch first – yes – yes," and he opened and shut his hand in a strangely restless manner.

The girl and the servant looked at one another in a perplexed way, for it was odd Norman should take the secret wooing of his daughter so quietly. He had never evinced much interest in Sylvia, who had been left mainly to the rough attentions of Miss Junk, but sometimes he had mentioned that Sylvia would be an heiress and fit to marry a poor peer. The love of Paul Beecot overthrew this scheme, if the man intended to carry it out, yet he did not seem to mind. Sylvia, thinking entirely of Paul, was glad, and the tense expression of her face relaxed; but Deborah sniffed, which was always an intimation that she intended to unburden her mind on an unpleasant subject.

"Well, sir," she said, folding her arms and scratching her elbow, "I do think as offspring ain't lumps of dirt to be trod on in this way. I arsk" – she flung out her hand towards Sylvia – "Is she your own or is she not?"

"She is my daughter," said Aaron, mildly. "Why do you ask?"

"'Cause you don't take interest you should take in her marriage, which is made in heaven if ever marriage was."

Norman raised his head like a war-horse at the sound of a trumpet-call. "Who talks of marriage?" he asked sharply.

"Dear father," said Sylvia, gently, "did you not hear? I love Paul, and I want to marry him."

Aaron stared at her. "He is not a good match for you," was his reply.

"He is the man I love," cried Sylvia, tapping with her pretty foot.

"Love," said Norman, with a melancholy smile, "there is no such thing, child. Talk of hate – for that exists," he clenched his hands again, "hate that is as cruel as the grave."

"Well I'm sure, sir, and what 'ave hates to do with my beauty there? As to love, exist it do, for Bart's bin talked into filling his 'eart with the same, by me. I got it out of a *Family Herald*," explained Deborah, incoherently, "where gentry throw themselves on their knees to arsk 'ands in marriage. Bart was down on his hunkers every night for two weeks before he proposed proper, and I ses, ses I – "

"Will you hold your tongue?" interrupted Aaron, angrily; "you gabble gabble till you make my head ache. You confuse me."

"I want to clear your 'ead," retorted Miss Junk, "seeing you take no interest in my pretty's livings."

Norman placed his fingers under Sylvia's chin, and tipped it up so that he could gaze into her eyes. "Child, do you love him?" he asked gravely.

"Oh, father!" whispered Sylvia, and said no more. The expression of her eyes was enough for Aaron, and he turned away with a sigh.

"You know nothing about him," he said at length.

"Begging pardon, sir, for being a gabbler," said Deborah, witheringly, "but know what he is we do – a fine young gent with long descents and stone figgers in churches, as Bart knows. Beecot's

his par's name, as is fighting with Mr. Paul by reason of contrariness and 'igh living, him being as stout as stout."

"Perhaps you will explain, Sylvia," said Aaron, turning impatiently from the handmaiden.

"I should have explained before," said the girl, quietly and very distinctly. "I loved Paul from the moment I saw him enter the shop six months ago. He came again and again, and we often talked. Then he told me of his love, and I confessed mine. Deborah wanted to know who he was, and if he was a good man. From what I learned of Paul's people he seemed to be all that was good and generous and high-minded and loving. Deborah sent Bart one holiday to Wargrove in Essex, where Paul's parents live, and Bart found that Paul had left home because he wanted to be an author. Paul is very popular in Wargrove, and everyone speaks well of him. So Deborah thought we might be engaged, and –"

"And have you a word to say against it, sir?" demanded Deborah, bristling.

"No," said Aaron, after a pause, "but you should have told me."

"We should," admitted Sylvia, quickly, "but Paul and I feared lest you should say 'No.'"

"My child," said the old man, gravely, "so long as you wed a kind and good man I have nothing to say. Sylvia, I have worked hard these many years and have made much money, which, by will, I have left to you. When I die you will be rich. He is poor."

"Paul – yes, he is poor. But what of that?"

"Many fathers might think that an objection," went on Aaron without noticing her remark. "But I do not. You shall marry Paul before I go to America."

"Lor'!" cried Deborah, "whatever are you a-goin' there for, sir?"

"That's my business," said Aaron, dryly, "but I go as soon as I can. I have sold the books; and the furniture of these rooms shall be disposed of before the end of the week. My gems I take to Amsterdam for sale, and I go abroad next week. When I return in a fortnight you can marry Mr. Beecot. He is a good young man. I quite approve of him."

Deborah snorted. "Seems to me as though you was glad to get quit of my pretty," she murmured, but too low to be overheard.

"Oh, father," cried Sylvia, putting her arms round Norman's neck, "how good you are! I *do* love him so."

"I hope the love will continue," said her father, cynically, and removing the girl's arms, to the secret indignation of Deborah. "I shall call on Mr. Beecot to-morrow and speak to him myself about the matter. If we come to an arrangement, for I have a condition to make before I give my entire consent, I shall allow you a certain sum to live on. Then I shall go to America, and when I die you will inherit all my money – when I die," he added, casting the usual look over his shoulders. "But I won't die for many a long day," he said, with a determined air. "At least, I hope not."

"You are healthy enough, father."

"Yes! Yes – but healthy people die in queer ways."

Deborah intervened impatiently. "I'm glad you wish to make my lily-queen happy, sir," said she, nodding, "but change your mind you may if Mr. Beecot don't fall in."

"Fall in?" queried Aaron.

"With this arrangements – what is they?"

Aaron looked undecided, then spoke impulsively, walking towards the door as he did so. "Let Mr. Beecot give me that opal serpent," he said, "and he shall have Sylvia and enough to live on."

"But, father, it is lost," cried Sylvia, in dismay.

She spoke to the empty air. Norman had hastily passed through the door and was descending the stairs quicker than usual. Sylvia, in her eagerness to explain, would have followed, but Deborah drew her back with rough gentleness. "Let him go, lily-queen," she said; "let sleeping dogs lie if you love me."

"Deborah, what do you mean?" asked Sylvia, breathlessly.

"I don't mean anything that have a meaning," said Miss Junk, enigmatically, "but your par's willing to sell you for that dratted brooch, whatever he wants it for. And you to be put against a brooch my honey-pot. I'm biling – yes, biling hard," and Deborah snorted in proof of the extremity of her rage.

"Never mind, Debby. Father consents that I shall marry Paul, and will give us enough to live on. Then Paul will write great books, and his father will ask him home again. Oh – oh!" Sylvia danced round the room gaily, "how happy I am."

"And happy you shall be if I die for it," shouted Deborah, screwing up her face, for she was not altogether satisfied, "though mysteries I don't hold with, are about. America – what's he going to America for? and with that brooch, and him locking us up every night to sleep in cellars. Police-courts and Old Baileys," said Miss Junk, frowning. "I don't like it, Sunbeam, and when you're married to Mr. Beecot I'll be that happy as never was."

Sylvia opened her grey eyes in wide surprise and a little alarm. "Oh, Debby, you don't think there's anything wrong with father?"

Miss Junk privately thought there was a good deal wrong, but she folded Sylvia in her stout arms and dismissed the question with a snort. "No, lovey, my own, there ain't. It's just my silly way of going on. Orange buds and brides the sun shines on, is your fortunes, Miss Sylvia, though how I'm going to call you Mrs. Beecot beats me," and Deborah rubbed her nose.

"I shall always be Sylvia to you."

"Bless you, lady-bird, but don't ask me to live with Mr. Beecot's frantic par, else there'll be scratchings if he don't do proper what he should do and don't. So there." Deborah swung her arms like a windmill. "My mind's easy and dinner's waiting, for, love or no love, eat you must, to keep your insides' clockwork."

When Bart heard the joyful news he was glad, but expressed regret that Norman should go to America. He did not wish to lose his situation, and never thought the old man would take him to the States also. Deborah vowed that if Aaron did want to transport Bart – so she put it – she would object. Then she unfolded a scheme by which, with Bart's savings and her own, they could start a laundry. "And I knows a drying ground," said Deborah, while talking at supper to her proposed husband, "as is lovely and cheap. One of them suburbs on the line to Essex, where my pretty will live when her husband's frantic par makes it up. Jubileetown's the place, and Victoria Avenue the street. The sweetest cottage at twenty pun' a year as I ever set eyes on. And m'sister as is married to a bricklayer is near to help with the family."

"The family?" echoed Bart, looking scared.

"In course – they will come, though it's early to be thinking of names for 'em. I'll do the washing, Bart, and you'll take round the cart, so don't you think things 'ull be otherwise."

"I don't want 'em to," said Bart, affectionately. "I always loved you, Debby darling."

"Ah," said Miss Junk, luxuriously, "I've taught you to, in quite a genteel way. What a scrubby little brat you were, Bart!"

"Yuss," said Mr. Tawsey, eating rapidly. "I saw myself to-day."

"In a looking-glarse?"

"Lor', Debby – no. But there was a brat all rags and dirty face and sauce as I was when you saw me fust. He come into the shop as bold as brass and arsked fur a book. I ses, 'What do you want with a book?' and he ses, looking at the shelves so empty, 'I sees your sellin' off,' he ses, so I jumped up to clip him over the 'ead, when he cut. Tray's his name, Debby, and he's the kid as talked to that cold gent Mr. Beecot brought along with him when he got smashed."

"Tray – that's a dog's name," said Deborah, "old dog Tray, and quite good enough for guttersnipes. As to Mr. Hay, don't arsk me to say he's good, for that he ain't. What's he want talking with gutter Trays?"

"And what do gutter Trays want with books?" asked Bart, "though to be sure 'twas impertinence maybe."

Deborah nodded. "That it was, and what you'd have done when you was a scrubby thing. Don't bolt your food, but make every bit 'elp you to 'ealth and long living. You won't 'ave gormandising when we've got the laundry, I can tell you."

Next day Aaron went off in the afternoon to Charing Cross Hospital, after holding a conversation with a broker who had agreed to buy the derelict furniture. The shop, being empty, was supposed to be closed, but from force of habit Bart took down the shutters and lurked disconsolately behind the bare counter. Several old customers who had not heard of the sale entered, and were disappointed when they learned that Aaron was leaving. Their lamentations made Bart quite low-spirited. However, he was polite to all, but his manners broke down when a Hindoo entered to sell boot-laces. "I ain't got nothing to sell, and don't want to buy nohow," said Bart, violently.

The man did not move, but stood impassively in the doorway like a bronze statue. He wore a dirty red turban carelessly wound round his small head, an unclean blouse which had once been white, circled by a yellow handkerchief of some coarse stuff, dark blue trousers and slippers with curled-up toes on naked feet. His eyes were black and sparkling and he had a well-trimmed moustache which contrasted oddly with his shabby attire. "Hokar is poor: Hokar need money," he whined in a monotone, but with his eyes glancing restlessly round the shop. "Give Hokar – give," and he held out the laces.

"Don't want any, I tell you," shouted Bart, tartly. "I'll call a peeler if you don't git."

"Ho! ho! who stole the donkey?" cried a shrill voice at the door, and from behind the hawker was poked a touzelled curly head, and a grinning face which sadly needed washing. "You leave this cove alone, won't y? He's a pal o' mine. D'y see?"

"You git along with your pal then," cried Bart, indignantly. "If he don't understand King's English, you do, Tray."

Tray darted into the middle of the shop and made a face at the indignant shopman by putting his fingers in his mouth to widen it, and pulling down his eyes. Hokar never smiled, but showed no disposition to move. Bart, angered at this blocking up the doorway, and by Tray's war dance, jumped the counter. He aimed a blow at the guttersnipe's head, but missed it and fell full length. The next moment Tray was dancing on his body with his tongue out derisively. Then Hokar gave a weird smile. "Kalee!" he said to himself. "Kalee!"

How the scene would have ended it is impossible to say, but while Bart strove to rise and overturn Tray, Aaron walked in past the Indian. "What's this?" he asked sharply. Tray stopped his dancing on Bart's prostrate body and gave a shrill whistle by placing two dirty fingers in his mouth. Then he darted between Norman's legs and made off. Hokar stood staring at the bookseller, and after a pause pointed with his finger. "One – eye," he said calmly, "no good!"

Aaron was about to inquire what he meant by this insult, when the Indian walked to the counter and placed something thereon, after which he moved away, and his voice was heard dying away down the street. "Hokar is poor – Hokar need money. Hokar, Christian."

"What's this?" demanded Norman, again assisting Bart roughly to his feet.

"Blest if I know," replied Tawsey, staring; "they're mad, I think," and he related the incoming of the Indian and the street arab. "As for that Tray," said he, growling, "I'll punch his blooming 'ead when I meets him agin, dancing on me – yah. Allays meddlin' that brat, jus' as he wos when Mr. Beecot was smashed."

"You saw that accident?" asked his master, fixing his one eye on him.

"Yuss," said Bart, slowly, "I did, but Deborah she told me to say nothink. Mr. Beecot was smashed, and his friend, the cold eye-glarsed gent, pulled him from under the wheels of that there machine with Tray to help him, and between 'em they carried him to the pavement."

"Humph!" said Aaron, resting his chin on his hand and speaking more to himself than to his assistant, "so Tray was on the spot. Humph!" Bart, having brushed himself, moved behind the counter and took up what Hoker had left. "Why, it's brown sugar!" he exclaimed, touching it with his tongue, "coarse brown sugar – a handful." He stretched out his palm heaped with the sugar to his master. "What do that furrein pusson mean by leaving dirt about?"

"I don't know, nor do I care," snapped Aaron, who appeared to be out of temper. "Throw it away!" which Bart did, after grumbling again at the impudence of the street hawker.

Norman did not go upstairs, but descended to the cellar, where he busied himself in looking over the contents of the three safes. In these, were many small boxes filled with gems of all kind, cut and uncut: also articles of jewellery consisting of necklaces, bracelets, stars for the hair, brooches, and tiaras. The jewels glittered in the flaring gaslight, and Aaron fondled them as though they were living things. "You beauties," he whispered to himself, with his one eye gloating over his hoard. "I'll sell you, though it goes to my heart to part with lovely things. But I must – I must – and then I'll go – not to America – oh, dear no! but to the South Seas. They won't find me there – no – no! I'll be rich, and happy, and free. Sylvia can marry and live happy. But the serpent," he said in a harsh tone, "oh, the opal serpent! The pawnbroker's shop. Stowley – yes – I know it. I know it. Stowley. They want it back; but they sha'n't. I'll buy it from Beecot by giving him Sylvia. It's lost – lost." He looked over his shoulder as he spoke in a terrified whisper. "Perhaps they have it, and then – then," he leaped up and flung the armful of baubles he held on to the deal table, "and then – I must get away – away."

He pulled out three or four coarse sacks of a small size and filled these with the jewellery. Then he tied a cord round the neck of each sack and sealed it. Afterwards, with a sigh, he closed the safe and turned down the gas. He did not leave by the trap, which led through the shop, but opened and locked the back door of the cellar, ascended the steps and went out into the street through the side passage. "If they come," he thought as he walked into the gathering night, "they won't find these. No! no!" and he hugged the bags closely.

Sylvia upstairs waited anxiously for the return of her father from the hospital, as she both wanted to hear how her lover was progressing and what he said about the permission to marry being given. But Aaron did not come to supper, as was his usual custom. Bart said, when inquiries were made, that the master had gone down into the cellar and was probably there. Meanwhile, according to his usual habit, he put up the shutters and departed. Sylvia and Deborah ate their frugal meal and retired to bed, the girl much disturbed at the absence of her father. Outside, in the street, the passers-by diminished in number, and as the night grew darker and the lamps were lighted hardly a person remained in Gwynne Street. It was not a fashionable thoroughfare, and after nightfall few people came that way. By eleven o'clock there was not a soul about. Even the one policeman who usually perambulated the street was conspicuous by his absence.

Sylvia, in her bed, had fallen into a troubled sleep, and was dreaming of Paul, but not happily. She seemed to see him in trouble. Then she woke suddenly, with all her senses alert, and sat up. Faintly she heard a wild cry, and then came the twelve strokes of the church bells announcing midnight. Breathlessly she waited, but the cry was not repeated. In the darkness she sat up listening until the quarter chimed. Then the measured footsteps of a policeman were heard passing down the street and dying away. Sylvia was terrified. Why, she hardly knew: but she sprang from her bed and hurried into Deborah's room. "Wake up," she said, "there's something wrong."

Deborah was awake in a moment and lighted the lamp. On hearing Sylvia's story she went down the stairs followed by the girl. The door at the bottom, strange to say, was not locked. Deborah opened this, and peering into the shop gave a cry of alarm and horror.

Lying on the floor was Aaron, bound hand and foot.

CHAPTER VII

A TERRIBLE NIGHT

"Go back! – go back, my precious!" cried Deborah, her first thought being how to spare Sylvia the sight.

But the girl, remembering that agonized cry which had awakened her, faint and far away as it sounded, pushed past the servant and ran into the middle of the shop. The lamp, held high by Deborah over her head, cast a bright circle of light on the floor, and in the middle of this Sylvia saw her father breathing heavily. His hands were bound behind his back in a painful way, his feet were tightly fastened, and his head seemed to be attached to the floor. At least, when the body (as it seemed from its stillness) suddenly writhed, it rolled to one side, but the head remained almost motionless. The two women hung back, clutching each other's hands, and were almost too horrified to move at the sight. "Look! Look!" cried Sylvia, gasping, "the mouth!" Deborah looked and gave a moan. Aaron's mouth was rigidly closed under a glittering jewel. Deborah bent down, still moaning, so great did the horror of the thing paralyse her speech, and saw the lights flash back from many diamonds: she saw bluish gleams and then a red sparkle like the ray of the setting sun. It was the opal serpent brooch, and Aaron's lips were fastened together with the stout pin. On his mouth and across his agonised face in which the one eye gleamed with terrific meaning the jewelled serpent seemed to writhe.

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