

# The Opal Serpent

By FERGUS HUME.  
Author of "The Mystery of a Hansom Cab,"  
"The Mandarin's Fan," Etc.

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The daughter was dressed like the mother, save that she wore pearls in place of diamonds. She talked but little, as usual, and sat smiling, the young image of the older woman. Hay also introduced Paul to a handsome young fellow of twenty-one, with rather a feeble face. This was Lord George Sandal, the pigeon Hay was plucking, and, although he had charming manners and an assumption of worldly wisdom, he was evidently one of those who had come into the world saddled and bridled for other folk's riding.

A third lady was also present, who called herself Aurora Qian, and Hay informed his friend in a whisper that she was an actress. Paul then remembered that he had seen her name in the papers as famous in light comedy. She was pretty and kittenish, with fluffy hair and an eternal smile. It was impossible to imagine a greater contrast to the massive firmness of Mrs. Krill than the lively, girlish demeanor of the little woman, yet Paul had an instinct that Miss Qian, in spite of her profession and odd name and childish giggle, was a more shrewd person than she looked. Every one was bright and merry and chatty, all save Maud Krill, who smiled and fanned herself in a statuesque way. Hay paid her great attention, and Paul knew very well that he intended to marry the silent woman for her money. It would be hardly earned, I thought, with such a firm looking mother-in-law as Mrs. Krill would certainly prove to be.

The dinner was delightful, well cooked, daintily served and leisurely eaten. A red shaded lamp threw a rosy light on the white cloth, the glittering crystal and bright silver. The number of diners was less than the Muses and more than the Graces, and every one laid himself or herself out to make things bright. And again Maud Krill may be mentioned as an exception. She ate well and held her tongue, merely smiling heavily when addressed. Paul, glancing at her serene face across the rosy hued table, wondered if she really was as calm as she looked and if she really lacked the brain power her mother seemed to possess.

The dinner passed off pleasantly. Lord George began to talk of racing, and Hay responded. Mrs. Krill alone seemed shocked. "I don't believe in gambling," she said icily.

"I hope you are not very down on it," said Hay. "Lord George and I propose to play bridge with you ladies in the next room."

"Maud can play and Miss Qian," said the widow. "I'll talk to Mr. Beecot, unless he prefers the fascination of the green cloth."

"I would rather talk to you," replied Paul, bowing.

Mrs. Krill nodded and then went out of the room with the younger ladies.



"I want you to drink to the health of my future bride," he said.

The three gentlemen filled their glasses with port, and Hay passed around a box of cigars. Soon they were smoking and chatting in a most amicable fashion. Lord George talked a great deal about racing and cards and his bad luck with both. Hay said very little and every now and then cast a glance at Paul to see how he was taking the conversation. At length, when Sandal became a trifle vehement on the subject of his losses, Hay abruptly changed the subject by refilling his glass and those of his companions. "I want you to drink to the health of my future bride," he said.

"What?" cried Paul, staring. "Miss Krill?"

"The same," responded Hay coldly. "You see I have taken your advice and intend to settle. Pash presented me to the ladies when next they came to his office, and since then I have been almost constantly with them. Miss Krill's affections were disengaged, and she therefore, with her mother's consent, became my promised wife."

"I wish you joy," said Lord George. "Why did this woman want Sylvia to

draining his glass and filling another, "and, by Jove, for your sake, I hope she's got money."

"Oh, yes, she's well off," said Hay calmly. "And you, Paul?"

"I congratulate you, of course," stammered Beecot, dazed, "but it's so sudden. You haven't known her above a month."

"Five weeks or so," said Hay, smiling, and, sinking his voice lower, he added: "I can't afford to let grass grow under my feet. This young ass here might snap her up, and Mrs. Krill would only be too glad to secure a title for Maud."

He had no time to say more, as they entered the drawing room. Almost as soon as they did Mrs. Krill summoned Paul to her side.

"And now," she said, "let us talk of Miss Norman."

## CHAPTER XV.

"I DON'T wish to talk of Miss Norman," said Paul bluntly.

"Then you can be no true lover," retorted the widow. "I disagree with you. A true lover does not talk to all and sundry concerning the most sacred feelings of his heart. Moreover, your remarks at our last meeting were not to my taste."

"I apologize," said Mrs. Krill promptly, "and will not offend in that way again. I did not know you then, but since Mr. Hay has spoken about you to me I know and appreciate you, Mr. Beecot."

But Paul was not to be cajoled in this manner. The more suave the woman was, the more he felt inclined to be on his guard, and he very wisely obeyed the prompting of his instinct. "I fear you do not know me, Mrs. Krill," he said as coldly as Hay could have spoken, "else you would hardly ask me to discuss with you, of all people, the lady whom I intend to make my wife."

"You are rather a difficult man to deal with," she replied, drawing her thick white eyebrows together. "But I like difficult men. That is why I admire Mr. Hay. He is not a silly, useless butterfly like that young lord there."

"Silly he is not, but I doubt his being useful. So far as I can see, Hay looks after himself and nobody else."

"He proposes to look after my daughter."

"So I understand," replied Beecot politely, "but that is a matter entirely for your own consideration."

Mrs. Krill still continued to smile in her placid way, but she was rather nonplussed all the same. From the appearance of Beecot, she had argued that he was one of those many men she could twist round her finger. But he seemed to be less easily guided than she expected, and for the moment she was silent, letting her hard eyes wander toward the card table, round which sat the four playing an eager and engrossing game of bridge. "You don't approve of that, perhaps?"

"No," said Paul calmly; "I certainly do not."

"Are you a Puritan, may I ask?"

Beecot shook his head and laughed. "I am a simple man who tries to do his duty in this world," he said, "and who very often finds it difficult to do that same duty."

"How do you define duty, Mr. Beecot?"

"We are becoming ethical," said Paul, with a smile. "I don't know that I am prepared with an answer at present."

"Then the next time we meet, for I hope," said Mrs. Krill, smoothing her face to a smile—it had grown rather somber—"that we shall often meet again. You must come and see us. We have taken a house in Kensington."

"Chosen by Mr. Hay?"

"Yes. He is our mentor in London society. I don't think," added Mrs. Krill, studying his face, "that you like Mr. Hay."

"As I am Mr. Hay's guest," said Paul dryly, "that is rather an unkind question to ask."

"I asked no question. I simply make a statement."

Beecot found the conversation rather embarrassing. In place of his pumping Mrs. Krill, she was trying to pump him, which reversal of his design he by no means approved of. He changed the subject of conversation by drawing a powerfully attractive red herring across the trail. "You wish to speak to me about Miss Norman," he remarked.

"I do," answered Mrs. Krill, who saw through his design, "but apparently that subject is as distasteful as a discussion about Mr. Hay."

"Both subjects are rather personal, I admit," Mrs. Krill. However, if you have anything to tell me which you would like Miss Norman to hear I am willing to listen."

"Ah! Now you are more reasonable," she answered in a pleased tone. "It is simply this, Mr. Beecot: I am very sorry for the girl. Through no fault of her own she is placed in a difficult position. I cannot give her a name, since her father sinned against her as he sinned in another way against me, but I can, through my daughter, who is guided by me, give her an income. It does not seem right that I should have all this money!"

"That your daughter should have all this money," interpolated Beecot.

"My daughter and I are one," replied Mrs. Krill calmly. "When I speak for myself I speak for her. But, as I say, I doesn't seem right we should be in influence and Miss Norman in poverty."

Paul might have been mistaken, but Mrs. Krill certainly seemed relieved, yet if she had anything to conceal in connection with the Red Pig why should she have mentioned the name?

"It is not a first class hotel," she went on smoothly and again with her false smile. "We had only farm laborers and such like as customers, but the custom was good, and we did very well. Then my husband took to drink."

"I should think her acceptance would depend upon the conditions."

"They are very simple," said Mrs. Krill in her deep tones and looking very straight at Paul. "She is to marry you and go to America."

Beecot's face did not change, since her hard eyes were on it. But he was puzzled under his mask of indifference.

"In that respect he must have changed," said Paul quickly, "for all the time

I knew him—six months it was—I never saw him the worse for drink, and I certainly never heard from those who would be likely to know that he indulged in alcohol to excess. All the same," added Paul, with an after thought of his conversation with Sylvia in the Embankment garden, "I fancied from his pale face and shaking hands and a tightness of the skin that he might drink."

"Yet the reason is patent," rejoined Mrs. Krill, just as quietly and quite as watchful as before. "Sylvia Norman is a young girl without much character. I fail to understand your reason, however."

"Exactly. He did. He drank brandy

in large quantities, and, strange to say, he never got drunk."

"What do you mean exactly?" asked Beecot curiously.

"Well," said Mrs. Krill, biting the top of her fan and looking over it, "Lemuel—Lemuel by the old name—never grew red in the face, and, even after years of drinking, he never showed any signs of intemperance. Certainly his hands would shake at times, but I never noticed particularly the tightness of the skin you talk of."

"A certain shiny look," explained Paul.

"Quite so. I never noticed it. But he never got drunk so as to lose his head or his balance," went on Mrs. Krill, "but he became a demon."

"A demon?"

"Yes," said the woman emphatically, "as a rule he was a timid, nervous little man, like a frightened rabbit, and would not harm a fly. But Lemuel, as you know, changes a nature to the contrary of what it actually is."

"I have heard that."

"You would have seen an example in Lemuel," she retorted. "When he drank brandy, he became a king, a sultan. From being timid he became bold; from not harming any one he was capable of murder. Often in his fits did he lay violent hands on me. But I managed to escape. When sober he would mean and apologize in a provokingly tearful manner. I hated and despised him," she went on, with flashing eyes, but careful to keep her voice from reaching the gamblers. "I was a fool to marry him. My father was a farmer, and I had a good education. I was attracted by the good looks of Lemuel and ran away with him from my father's farm in Buckinghamshire."

"That's where Stowley is," murmured Paul.

"Stowley?" echoed Mrs. Krill, whose ears were very sharp. "Yes, I know that town. Why do you mention it?"

"The opal serpent brooch with which you are to be her husband."

"Pardon me, no. I would never take such a responsibility on me. I shall tell Miss Norman what you say and convey her answer to you."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Krill graciously. But she was annoyed that her golden bait had not been taken immediately, and in spite of her suavity Paul could see that she was annoyed, the more so when she began to explain. "Of course you understand my feelings."

"I confess I don't quite. Naturally the fact that you are connected with the murder in the public eyes!"

"Pardon me," said the woman swiftly, "but I am not. The name of Krill has hardly been noticed. The public know that Aaron Norman was murdered. No one talks of Lemuel Krill or thinks that I am the widow of the murdered man. Possibly I may come across some people who will connect the two names and look askance at me, but the majority of people—such as Lord George there"—she pointed with her golden bait"—do not think of me in the way you say. As he did, they will think they remember the name!"

"Did Lord George say that to you?" said Paul swiftly.

"No. But he did to Mr. Hay, who told me," rejoined Mrs. Krill quite as swiftly.

"To-night?" asked Beecot, remembering that Hay had not spoken privately to Mrs. Krill since they came in from the dining room.

"Oh, no—on another occasion. Lord George has several times said that he has a faint recollection of my name. Possibly the connection between me and the murder may occur to his mind, but he is really so very stupid that I hope he will forget all about the matter."

"Why did he change his name?" asked Beecot eagerly—too eagerly, in fact, for she drew back.

"To-night?" echoed Mrs. Krill.

She gave it to my mother, who sent it to me. When I had an accident I lost it, but who picked it up I can't say."

"The assassin must have picked it up," declared Mrs. Krill decisively, "else it would not have been used in that cruel way, though why such a brooch should have been used at all I can't understand. I suppose my husband did not tell you why he wanted to buy the brooch?"

"Who told you that he did?" asked Paul quickly.

"Mr. Pash. He told me all about the matter, but not the reason why my husband wanted the brooch."

"Pash doesn't know," said Beecot, "nor do I. Your husband fainted when I first showed him the brooch, but I don't know why. He said nothing."

Again Mrs. Krill's face, in spite of her care, showed a sense of relief at his ignorance. "But I must get back to my story," she said in a hard tone.

"There is no forcing in the matter," responded the woman. "I have taken quite a fancy to you, Mr. Beecot, and you shall know what I do."

"Pray do not tell me if you would rather not."

"But I would rather," said Mrs. Krill bluntly. "It will prevent your misconception of anything you may hear about us. My husband's real name was Lemuel Krill, and he married me thirty years ago. I will be frank with you and admit that neither of us were gentlefolks. We kept a public house on the outskirts of Christchurch, in Hants, called the Red Pig." She looked anxiously at him as she spoke.

"A strange name."

"Have you never heard of it before?"

"No. Had I heard the name it would have remained in my memory from its eddy."

"I should never have credited him with so much sense," said Mrs. Krill contemptuously. "While at Christchurch he was nothing but a drunkard, whining when sober and a furious beast when drunk. I managed all the house and looked after my little daughter. Lemuel led me a dog's life, and we quarreled incessantly. At length, when Maud was old enough to be my companion, Lemuel ran away. I kept on the Red Pig and waited for him to return. But he never came back, and for over twenty years I heard nothing of him till I saw the handbills and his portrait and heard of his death. Then I came to see Mr. Pash, and the sauce burns easily."

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