

# Fergus Hume THE CLOCK STRUCK ONE

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## THE CLOCK STRUCK ONE

## DIANA ON A BICYCLE

Over the bridge which spans the railway two miles from Canterbury a girl was riding a bicycle. She was perfect mistress of her machine--and nerves; for on the slope of the hill she let the wheels run freely, and did not trouble to use the brake. The white dust clouded the air as she spun down to the level; and the heat of the day--a July noon--was so great that she was fain to dismount for the sake of coolness. A wayside fence offered a tempting seat; and, with a questioning glance to right and left, the girl balanced herself lightly on the topmost rail. Here she perched in a meditative fashion, and fanned her flushed face with her straw hat. A pretty girl in so unconventional a position, unchaperoned and fearless, would have shocked the susceptibilities of our grandmothers. But this is the age of the New Woman, and the girl was a type of her epoch.

Assuredly a finer representative could not have been found. She was tall and straight, deep-bosomed and stately. Her sunburnt complexion, her serviceable tailor-made dress and her stout shoes of brown leather, denoted a preference for life out of doors. Across her broad forehead, round her well-shaped head, fluttered tiny curls in a loose mass of burnished gold. For the rest, a nose aquiline and two steady eyes of gray, a mouth rather wide, red-lipped and firm; there you have a portrait in your mind's eye of a charming gentlewoman--new style. Diana must have been just such another; but for brightness, sympathy, and womanly kindness the maid surpassed the goddess. If mythology is to be credited, Diana was cold, serene and--vide Actæon's disaster--a trifle cruel. On the whole, this mortal was more lovable than that immortal, and less dangerous;

otherwise the comparison holds good. Miss Dora Carew was a modern Diana--on a bicycle.

Shortly, Diana of Kent reassumed her hat, and, folding her arms, stared absently across the fields. She saw not sheep or meadow, hedge or ditch, windmill or rustling tree, for her mind was absorbed in her own thoughts; and these--as indexed by her changing expressions--did not seem to be over-pleasant. Dora frowned, smiled, wrinkled her forehead into two perpendicular lines between the eyebrows, and finally made a gesture of impatience; this last drawn forth by a glance at her watch.

"I do wish he would be punctual," she muttered, jumping off the fence; "if not, I must----"

Further speech was interrupted by the crisp vibration of a bell, and immediately afterwards a second bicycle, whirling down the slope, brought a young man to her feet. He was smart, lithe and handsome; also he was full of apologies for being late, and made the most reasonable excuses, hat in hand.

"But you know, Dora, a doctor's time is not his own," he concluded; "and I was detained by a new patient--an aristocratic patient, my dear"--this he said with subdued pride--"Lady Burville, a guest at Hernwood Hall."

"Lady Burville!" replied Miss Carew, starting. "Laura Burville?"

Dr. Scott looked profoundly surprised.

"I do not know that her name is Laura," he said; "and how you came to----"

"I heard it yesterday, Allen, for the first time."

"Indeed! From whom?"

"From the lips of my guardian."

"Mr. Edermont spoke of Lady Burville?" The young doctor frowned thoughtfully. "Strange! This morning Lady Burville spoke of Mr. Edermont."

"What did she say, Allen? No, wait"--with an afterthought--"why did she call you in? Is she ill?"

"Indisposed--slightly indisposed--nothing to speak of. Yesterday she was at church, and the heat was too much for her. She fainted, and so----"

He completed the sentence with a shrug.

"Oh!" said Dora, putting much expression into the ejaculation; "and yesterday my guardian also became indisposed in church."

"Really? Chillum Church?"

"Chillum Church."

They looked questioningly at one another, the same thought in the brain of each. Here was a stranger in the neighbourhood, a guest at Hernwood Hall, and she inquired for a recluse scarcely known beyond the walls of his house. Again, here was a man who had not been absent from the district for over twenty years, who dwelt in strict retirement, and he mentioned the name--the unknown Christian name--of the strange lady. This coincidence--if it could be called so--was odd in the extreme, and even these two unsuspicious young people were struck by its singularity. Dora was the first to speak, and her remark was apparently irrelevant.

"Come with me to the Red House," said she, moving towards her bicycle.
"Mr. Edermont is ill."

"Consequent upon his indisposition of yesterday, I suppose," replied Scott, following. "Since you wish it, I obey; but do not forget my position in the house."

Miss Carew waited until he glided alongside, and they were both swinging easily down the road. Then she glanced at him with a smile--a trifle roguish, and wholly charming.

"What is your position in the house, Allen?"

"Is it necessary to explain, my dear? I am the son of Mr. Edermont's oldest friend. I am one of the few people he admits to see him. With his sanction, I am your most devoted lover. But"--and here the doctor became emphatic--"Mr. Edermont will not have me as a medical attendant--he will not have anyone. So my calling to see him professionally is rather--forgive me, my dearest--is rather impertinent."

"Then you must be impertinent enough to save his life," retorted Dora sharply. "He has never been really ill before, so far as I know, and there has been no occasion for a doctor at the Red House. But now"--her face assumed a serious expression--"he is not himself. He is agitated, distraught, terrified."

"H'm! Terrified? That is strange. Are you sure that his indisposition dates from service in Chillum Church?"

"It dates from the reading of the Litany," said Dora precisely. "You know, Allen, that for years my guardian has never failed to attend morning service at Chillum. You know also--for I have told you often--that at the prayers for deliverance from battle, murder, and sudden death he is accustomed to look questioningly round the congregation. He did so yesterday, as usual, and immediately afterwards he sank back half fainting

in his seat. I wished him to leave the church at once, but he refused to go until the text was given out. Then he went home."

"And since then?"

"He has shut himself up in his room, and has neither eaten nor slept. He refuses to see me or speak to me. Several times I have been to his door to inquire if I could do anything, but he will not let me enter. He refuses admittance even to Mr. Joad. And all the hours he paces up and down, talking to himself."

"What does he talk about?" asked Scott curiously.

"I cannot say, as he speaks too low for me to hear. But I caught the name of Laura Burville twice. Alarmed lest he should fall seriously ill, I wrote to you yesterday, making this appointment, and waited at the bridge to explain. What do you think of it, Allen?"

Scott shrugged his shoulders.

"I can hardly say until I see Mr. Edermont. At the present moment I can be sure only of one thing--that the sight of Lady Burville upset your guardian in the church, and *vice versâ*."

"But why should they be upset at the sight of one another? They are strangers."

"H'm! We cannot be certain of that," replied Allen cautiously. "That he should mention her name, that she should ask about him--these facts go to prove that, whatever they may be now to one another, they were not strangers in the past."

"Then the past must be quite twenty years ago," said Dora thoughtfully, "for Mr. Edermont has not left the Red House all that time. But what did Lady Burville say when you told her about my guardian?"

"She said--nothing. A wonderfully self-possessed little woman, although she looks like a doll and talks like a fool, Dora; therefore the fact of her fainting yesterday in church is all the more strange. I said that Mr. Edermont was averse to strangers, that he dwelt in the Red House, and that he was a good friend to me."

"You did not mention my name?"

"Dora! As though I should converse about you to a stranger! No, my dear. I merely told so much about Mr. Edermont, prescribed for the lady's nerves, and informed her host and Mr. Pallant that she would be all right tomorrow."

"And who is Mr. Pallant?"

"Did I not mention his name? Oh, he is another guest of Sir Harry's. He left the message that I was to call and see Lady Burville."

"Indeed. Why did not Sir Harry call in his own doctor?"

"Faith! that is more than I can say," replied Scott. "All the better for me that he did not. But how this Mr. Pallant found me out I do not know. It is my impression that, hearing he was riding into Canterbury, Lady Burville asked him privately to send her a doctor, and as he chanced on my doorplate first, he called on me. A lucky accident for a struggling practitioner, eh, Dora?"

"No doubt--if it was an accident," said she dryly. "What is this Mr. Pallant like, Allen?"

"A red-haired, blue-eyed, supercilious beast. I disliked him at sight. Rather a shame on my part, seeing that he has done me a good turn."

By this time they had arrived at the outskirts of Chillum, and alighted before a massive gate of wood set in a high brick wall, decorated at the top with broken glass.

The green spires of poplar-trees rose over the summit of this wall, and further back could be seen the red-tiled gable of a house. Opposite the gates on the other side of the dusty white road there was a small cottage buried in a plantation of fir-trees. An untidy garden extended from its front-door to the quickset hedge which divided the grounds from the highway, and the house had a desolate and solitary look, as though rarely inhabited.

"Does old Joad still sleep in his cottage?" asked Allen, with a careless glance at the tiny house.

"Of course! You know Mr. Edermont won't let anyone stay in the house at night but myself and Meg Gance."

"That is the cook?"

"Cook, housemaid, general servant, and all the rest of it," replied Dora gaily; "she and I between us manage the domestic affairs of the mansion. Mr. Edermont is too taken up with his library and Mr. Joad to pay attention to such details."

"He is always in the clouds," assented Allen, smiling. "By the way, who is Mr. Joad?"

Dora laughed and shrugged her shoulders.

"I'm sure I can't tell you that," she replied carelessly; "he is an old college friend of my guardian's, who gives him house-room."

"But not a bed?"

"No. Joad has to turn out at nine o'clock every night and return to his cottage. I believe he passes most of his evenings in the company of Mr. Pride."

"Pride, Pride?" said Allen thoughtfully--"oh, that is the chubby little man who is so like your guardian."

"He is like him in the distance," answered Dora, "but a nearer view dispels the illusion. Pride is, as you say, chubby, while Mr. Edermont is rather lean. But they are both short, both have heads of silvery hair, and both rejoice in patriarchal beards. Yes, they are not unlike one another."

While this conversation was taking place the young people were standing patiently before the jealously-closed gate. Dora had rung the bell twice, but as yet there was no sign that they would be admitted. The sun was so hot, the road so dusty, that Allen became impatient.

"Haven't you the key of the gate yourself, Dora?"

"No. Mr. Edermont won't allow anyone to have the key but himself. I don't know why."

"Let us go round to the little postern at the side of the wall," suggested Allen.

Dora shook her head with a laugh.

"Locked, my dear, locked. Mr. Edermont keeps the postern as firmly closed as these gates."

"A most extraordinary man!" retorted Scott, raising his eyebrows. "I wonder what he can be afraid of in this eminently respectable neighbourhood."

"I think I can tell you, Allen."

"Can you, my dear? Then Mr. Edermont has said why----"

"He has said nothing," interrupted Dora, "but I have eyes and ears, my dear Allen. Mr. Edermont is afraid of losing his----"

"His money," interrupted Allen in his turn. "Oh yes, of course."

"There is no 'of course' in the matter," said Miss Carew sharply; "he is afraid of losing his life."

"His life? Dora!"

"I am sure of it, Allen. Remember his favourite prayer in the Litany--the prayer which takes his wandering eyes round the church: 'From battle and murder, and from sudden death, good Lord, deliver us."

## THE STRANGE BEHAVIOUR OF DR. SCOTT

The appearance of the individual who admitted them into what may be called the prison of Mr. Edermont was sufficiently odd to merit a description. Lambert Joad, the friend, factotum, and parasite of Dora's guardian, was a short, stout man verging on sixty years. He had a large bland face, clean-shaven, and bluish-red in hue; his mouth was loose, his chin double, his jowl pendulous; and his insignificant nose was scarcely redeemed by two watery eyes of a pale blue. A few tufts of white hair covered sparsely the baldness of his skull; and his ears, hands, and feet were all large and ill-shaped. He dressed in rusty black, wore carpet slippers, and a wisp of white ribbon did duty as a collar. This last adornment hinted at a clerical vocation, and hinted rightly, for Lambert Joad was an unsuccessful parson of the Anglican Church.

Some forty years previously he had been a college friend of Edermont's, and in due course had taken orders, but either from lack of brains, or of eloquence, or perhaps from his Quilpish looks, he had failed to gain as much as a curacy. In lieu thereof he had earned a bare subsistence by making notes in the British Museum for various employers, and it was while thus engaged that Edermont had chanced upon him again; out of sheer pity the owner of the Red House had taken the unlucky Joad to Kent, and there permitted him to potter about library and garden--a vegetable existence which completely satisfied the unambitious brain of the creature. He was devoted to the god who had given him this ease.

But the odd part of the arrangement was that Edermont would not permit his hanger-on to remain in the house at night. Punctually at nine Mr. Joad betook himself to the small cottage fronting the gates, and there ate and slept until nine the next morning, when he presented himself again in the library, to read, and dust, and arrange, and catalogue the many books. For twenty years this contract had been faithfully carried out by the pair of college friends. From nine to nine daylight Joad haunted the house; from nine to nine darkness he remained in his tumbledown cottage.

Being now on duty, he admitted Dora and her lover, and after closing the gates, stood staring at them; with a book hugged to his breast, and a cunning look in his eyes. His swollen and red nose suggested snuff; his trembling hands and bloodshot eyes, drink; so that on the whole he was by no means a pleasant spectacle to behold. Dora threw a look of disgust on this disreputable, dirty Silenus, whom she particularly disliked, and addressed him sharply, according to custom.

"Where is Mr. Edermont?" said she, stepping back from his immediate neighbourhood; "I have brought Dr. Scott to see him."

"Julian is still in his bedroom," replied this Silenus in a voice of surprising beauty and volume; "but he does not wish to see anyone, least of all a doctor."

"Oh, never mind that, Mr. Joad," said Allen good-humouredly. "I come as a friend to inquire after the health of Mr. Edermont."

"I quite understand," grunted the other; "you will make medical suggestions in the guise of friendly remarks. So like your father, that is."

"My father, Mr. Joad? Did you know him?" asked Scott, considerably astonished.

"Yes; I do not think," added Joad, with a spice of maliciousness, "that you had that advantage."

"He died when I was five years old," replied Allen sadly, "so I remember him very slightly. But it is strange that I should have known you all these months without becoming aware of the fact that you were acquainted with my father."

"All this is beside the point," broke in Dora severely. "I want you to see Mr. Edermont. Afterwards you can talk to Mr. Joad."

"I shall be glad to do so. There are many things I wish to know about my father."

"Then, why ask me, Dr. Scott, when Julian is at hand?"

"Mr. Edermont refuses to answer my inquiries."

"In that case," said Joad, with great deliberation, "I should ask Lady Burville."

The young man was so startled by this speech that for the moment he could say nothing. By the time he had recovered his tongue Joad was already halfway across the lawn. Scott would have followed him, but that Dora laid a detaining hand upon his arm.

"Later on, Allen," she said firmly; "in the meantime, see my guardian."

"But, Dora, Lady Burville's name again hints----"

"It hints at all manner of strange things, Allen. I know that as well as you do. I tell you what, my dear: the coming of this woman is about to cause a change in our lives."

"Dora! On what grounds do you base such a supposition?"

"On the grounds that you know," she returned distinctly. "I can give you no others. But I have a belief, a premonition--call it what you will--that Lady Burville's coming is the herald of change. If you would know more, ask Mr. Edermont who she is, and why he fainted at the sight of her."

By this time they were standing on the steps of the porch, whence the wings of mellow red brick spread to right and left, facing the sunlit lawn. Square-framed windows extended along this front above and below, and an upper one of these over the porch was wide open. As Allen and Dora stood by the steps, a wild white face peered out and saw them in the sunlight. Had they looked up they would have seen Mr. Edermont, and have refrained from further conversation. But Fate so willed it that they talked on, unconscious of a listener. It was Allen who reopened the subject of his new patient, who had been referred to both by Edermont and Joad in so mysterious a way.

"After all," said Allen meditatively, "I do not see why you should have a premonition of change. That Lady Burville should know Mr. Edermont is nothing to you."

"Quite so; but that Lady Burville should know something about your late father is something to you. Did she mention anything about it this morning?"

"Not a word," he replied; "it was strange that she should not have done so."

"Not stranger than that you should have been called in to attend her."

"That was purely an accident."

"I don't think so," said Dora deliberately; "at least, not in the face of Mr. Joad's remark."

Dr. Scott looked puzzled.

"What do you make out of this Lady Burville?" he asked.

Before Dora could answer the question, a voice spoke to them from above.

"Do not talk any more of that woman," cried Mr. Edermont with a tremor in his tones. "Come upstairs, Allen; I have something for your private ear."

And then they heard the window hastily closed, as though Mr. Edermont were determined that the forthcoming conversation should be as private as possible.

"Go up at once, Allen," whispered Dora, pushing him towards the door.
"You speak to my guardian, and I shall question Mr. Joad about Lady
Burville. Mind, you must tell me all that Mr. Edermont says to you."

"There may not be anything to tell," said Allen doubtfully.

Dora looked at him seriously.

"I am sure that what is told will change your life and mine," she said.

"Dora! you know something?"

"Allen, I know nothing; I am going simply by my premonition."

"I am not superstitious," said Scott, and entered the house.

He was not superstitious, as he stated; yet at that moment he might well have been so, for in the mere act of ascending the stairs he was entering on

a dark and tortuous path, at the end of which loomed the shadow of death.

When his gray tweeds vanished up the stairs, Dora turned her eyes in the direction of Mr. Joad. He was seated in a straw chair under a cedar-tree, and looked a blot on the loveliness of the view. All else was blue sky and stretches of emerald green, golden sunshine, and multicoloured flowers; this untidy, disreputable creature, a huddled up mass of dingy black, seemed out of place. But, for all that, Dora was glad he was within speaking distance, and alone. So to speak, he was the key to the problem which was then perplexing her--the problem of her premonition.

That a healthy, breezy young woman should possess so morbid a fancy seems unreasonable; and Dora took this view of the matter herself. She was troubled rarely by forebodings, by premonitions, or vague fears; nevertheless, there was a superstitious side to her character. Hitherto, in her tranquil and physically healthy existence, there had been no chance for the development of this particular side; but now, from various causes, it betrayed itself in a feeling of depression. Mr. Edermont's fainting and mention of Lady Burville; that lady's fainting and anxiety concerning the recluse; and finally, Mr. Joad's assertion that Lady Burville had known Allen's father--all these facts hinted that something was about to happen. Dora did not know what the something could possibly be, but she felt vaguely that it would affect the lives of herself and her lover. Therefore she was anxious to know the worst at once, and accordingly, going out to meet her troubles, she walked forward to the Silenus on the lawn.

Joad saw her coming, and looked up with what was meant to be a fascinating smile. This disreputable old creature had the passions of youth in spite of his age, and in his senile way he greatly admired the ward of his patron. His admiration took the annoying form of constantly forestalling her wishes. If Dora wanted a book, a paper, a chair, a bunch of flowers,

Joad was always at hand to supply her wants. At first she accepted these attentions carelessly enough, deeming them little but the kindly pertinacities of an amiable old man; but of late she had found Joad and his attentions rather troublesome. Moreover, his obsequious demeanour, his leers, his oily courtesies, made her feel uneasy. Nevertheless, she did not dream that the old creature was in love with her beauty. So absurd an idea never entered her head. But Joad was in love, for all that, and cherished ardently his hopeless passion.

"Mr. Joad," said Dora abruptly, coming to the point at once, "who is Lady Burville?"

"Dear Miss Carew," cried the old man, ignoring the question, and rising to his feet, "pray be seated in this chair. The sun is hot, but here you will be out of the glare."

"Never mind about the glare and the chair," said Dora, making an unconscious rhyme; "I asked you a question. Who is Lady Burville?"

"Lady Burville?" repeated Joad, seeing he could no longer escape answering; "let me see. Mr. Pride said something about her. Oh yes: she is the wife of Sir John Burville, the celebrated African millionaire, and I believe she is the guest of Sir Harry Hernwood at the Hall."

"Go on," said Dora, seeing that he paused; "what else do you know?"

"Nothing. What I repeated was only Pride's gossip. I am ignorant of the lady's history. And if you come to that, Miss Dora," added Joad with a grotesque smile, "why should I not be ignorant?"

"But you hinted that Lady Burville knew Allen's father," persisted Dora, annoyed by his evasion of her question.

"Did I?" said Joad, suddenly conveying a vacant expression into his eyes. "I do not remember, Miss Dora. If I did, I was not thinking of what I was saying."

"You are wilfully deceiving me, Mr. Joad."

"Why should I, Miss Dora? If I knew anything about this lady I would tell you willingly; but it so happens that I know nothing."

"You spoke as though you knew a good deal, retorted Dora angrily.

"I spoke at random, young lady. And if you--why, what's the matter with Julian?"

It was little wonder that he asked the question, for Edermont had opened his window again, and was hanging out of it crying and gesticulating like some terrible Punch.

"Lambert! Lambert!" he shrieked. "Come and help me! He will kill me--kill me!"

Joad shuffled towards the house as quickly as his old legs could take him. He was followed by the astonished Dora, and they were about to step into the entrance-hall, when Allen Scott came flying down the stairs. He was wild-eyed, breathless, and as gray in hue as the clothes he wore.

"Allen!" cried Dora, recoiling at his mad looks, "what is the matter?"

"Don't stop me, for God's sake!" said the doctor hoarsely, and avoiding her outstretched hand, he fled hastily down the garden-path. A click of the gate, which had not been locked by Joad, and he vanished from their sight.

Dora stared at Joad; he looked back at her with a malicious grin at the flight of her lover, and overhead, at the open window, they heard the hysterical sobbing of Julian Edermont.

## TO EVERY MAN HIS OWN FEAR

After a pause of astonishment at the inexplicable flight of her lover, Dora ran upstairs to the room of Mr. Edermont. It was imperative that she should learn the truth of this disturbance, and, in the absence of Dr. Scott, her guardian was the proper person to explain the matter. Had Dora glanced back at Joad, who followed closely, she might have gathered from his malignant expression that he was likely also to afford an explanation; but in her anxiety she went directly to the door of Mr. Edermont's bedroom. It was wide open, and the occupier was still sobbing by the open window.

"What is the matter?" cried Dora, hurrying forward. "Why has Allen----"

Edermont lifted up a white face wet with tears, and flung out two thin hands with a low cry of terror. Then, with a sudden anxiety in his eyes, he staggered rather than walked across the room, and closed the door sharply. Joad had already entered, and, still hugging a book, stood looking grimly at the swaying figure of his patron. With his back to the door, Edermont interrogated his ward and his friend.

"Has he gone? Is the gate closed--is it locked and barred?"

"He has gone, and the gate is safe," said Joad, for Dora was too astonished by the oddity of these questions to reply.

Edermont wiped the sweat from his forehead, nodded weakly, and finally subsided into an armchair. Here he bowed his face in his hands, and Dora