

***FERGUS
HUME***

***THE PURPLE
FERN***

Fergus Hume

The Purple Fern

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CHAPTER I

THE MAN IN GREY

The train to Crumel was late. Due at four o'clock, it failed to reach its destination, until ten minutes past the hour. This was not the fault of the branch-line authorities. The London express had been behind time at Werry Junction, whereby the local had been forced to wait. The delay mattered little to the majority of the passengers, as time in the wilds of Essex is of less value than a similar commodity in the metropolis. But Dr. Jerce, being a famous urban physician, felt annoyed, as he had come down hurriedly, in this unpleasant weather, to see a patient, and wished to be back in Harley Street by nine o'clock. Also Dr. Jerce was Napoleonic in his love for precision, and the failure of the Company to obey the time-table irritated his usually bland temper.

Jerce was not unlike the great Corsican in looks,—that is, he was short and stout, calm in his manner and impenetrable in expression. His clean-shaven face, classical in outline, save that the jaw was of the bull-dog order, did not betray his present feelings of exasperation at the pin-prick of delay. When the belated local finally steamed leisurely into the terminus, he buttoned his sable-lined coat, adjusted his shining silk hat, and dusted unnecessarily his smart patent leather boots, so unsuitable to the season. Finally, with the same imperturbable air, he collected the Christmas magazines he had been reading on the way

down, and stepped on to the thronged platform. A man in a grey coat, grey gloves, grey trousers, and a grey Homburg hat, leaped from the adjoining carriage, and followed closely at the heels of the popular physician. Jerce did not turn his head, as no sixth sense told him that he was being watched.

It wanted only a week to Christmas, and the weather was quite of the traditional Dickens kind. Deep snow almost overwhelmed the quaint little Essex town, and this, hardened by many nights of frost, sparkled like jewels in the clear radiance of street-lamps and shop-lights. The short winter's day drew to a bitterly cold close, and although the pedestrians, crowding the narrow, twisted streets, were, for the most part, warmly clad, many of the more sensitive shivered in the cutting east wind. But Jerce, having a sufficiency of flesh to cover his bones, and a fur-lined overcoat to protect that same flesh, stepped out briskly and comfortably, without regard to the chills of the season. The man in grey followed him at a respectful distance, keenly observant.

The shops, already decked for Yule-tide, looked unusually lavish with their blaze of lights, their mistletoe, and red-berried holly branches, and their extra display of Santa Claus presents and Christmas provisions. But the doctor did not look at the glittering windows, nor did the man in grey. Jerce, who appeared to be well known, nodded smilingly, right and left, to respectful townspeople, and his follower took note of this popularity. Finally, the physician turned down a somewhat dark side-lane--for it was not yet an official street--and entered an iron gate on the left-hand side, some distance down. This admitted him into the

grounds of a large, square Georgian mansion of mellow red brick, covered with ivy and snow, and looking like a house with a history. The watcher was compelled to remain outside the high iron railings, as he was unable to give any plausible reason for entering. When Jerce rang the bell and finally disappeared inside the mansion, the grey man muttered an impatient word or two, and resigned himself to sauntering up and down the lane, until such time as the doctor should emerge.

But the air was nipping, while the man in grey was thin and thinly clothed. Shortly he began to shiver and turn blue. Glancing down the semi-lane, where it led into the truly rural country, he noticed the brilliant lights of an ambitious inn. Measuring with his eye the distance from the Georgian mansion to this hostel, the man in grey saw that he could shelter therein, and yet keep an eye on the gate, out of which the doctor presumably would come. The opportunity was too tempting. Crossing the road, he entered the bar, which looked warm and cheery. Jerce would scarcely return to London for an hour or so, therefore the watcher thought that, with an occasional glance out of the bar-room door, he could very well keep guard over the doctor's comings and goings. But the first thing he did, when inside, was to demand a Bradshaw.

"Lor' now," prattled the lady behind the counter, in a thin mincing voice, the very ghost of speech and with restless volubility, "if I didn't see it only an hour ago. Yes, I did, say what you like. Mr. Ferdinand,--though to be sure you don't know him,--but Mr. Ferdinand came in for a Scotch and Polly, and asked to look up the London trains for this evening. He

had that Bradshaw in the private bar, if I remember, which I can't be certain. Through that door, sir, if you please. I'm sure I'll be able to oblige, though I can't be positive."

When this incoherent speech terminated, the thin stranger passed through a narrow door in a partition, plastered with gaudy almanacks and sober advertisement sheets, to enter a small cupboard cut off from the bar by the aforesaid partition. It contained two deal chairs, a deal table covered with a red cloth and strewn with newspapers and guide books, and nothing else. Dimly lighted by a smelling swing lamp dangling over the table, and better illuminated by a bright fire, it looked comfortable enough, when contrasted with the snowy world outside. The lady who talked so much, suddenly appeared from somewhere like a jack-in-the-box, and after turning up the lamp, poked the fire vigorously and unnecessarily, chattering all the time.

"You see, sir, only the gentry come to this private bar," she said, in her high-pitched voice, and taking stock of the stranger all the time, "and there's no gentry hereabouts tonight. Mr. Ferdinand,--but you don't know him, of course, but Mr. Ferdinand, and a pleasant young gentleman he is, was the last to look at that Bradshaw. Oh, yes, you were asking for it, sir,--of course, you were, though where it can be, I can't say, happy as I'd be to oblige you. But the table is so very untidy, sir,--" making it worse by tossing about papers and books and pamphlets,--"people won't leave things where they ought to, and this Bradshaw, which is a new one,--oh, here you are, sir. You'll be sure to find the train you want, or perhaps the local time-table," she snatched up a pink sheet, "which is published as an advertisement by my

uncle, who keeps the baker's shop on the left hand side of our High Street, going towards the station. Oh, you prefer Bradshaw, sir. Well, sir, some likes this and some that, but I never, never could understand Bradshaw myself, my head for figures not being like my brother, who is truly wonderful, and quite a phenomenon. Figures is child's bricks to him, and--oh, there's someone asking for beer. You'll excuse me, sir, won't you," with a winning smile. "I'll attend to this customer and return, when I set Lydia to watch the others."

With these highly unnecessary remarks to a wearied listener, the brisk landlady, who was thin and small, tight-laced, and highly-coloured, disappeared as suddenly as she had presented herself, and was heard a moment later exchanging interminable greetings with the last person who had entered to toast the Season. The man in grey shrugged his lean shoulders and breathed a sigh of relief, when Mrs. Talkative departed. Shortly he nodded contentedly over the Bradshaw. The next London train did not leave Crumel until seven o'clock, so if Dr. Jerce intended to go to town on this night, he would have to be at the station at that hour. Of course, there was a chance that the doctor might remain, but the grey man did not think that this was likely, as he had observed the absence of a bag. Still, it was as well to provide against emergencies, and, when the landlady returned, the stranger asked a question in a deep, grave voice, which suggested, in some uncanny way, cemeteries and funerals.

"I may have to remain here to-night," said he, surveying the brightly-dressed, would-be fashionable lady, "can I have a bed, please?"

With all her frivolous exterior, the little woman had a head for business, and first glanced round the room to see if the visitor had brought a bag. He guessed the meaning of her hesitation.

"I shall pay for a bed and for two meals in advance," he remarked, solemnly, "that is, if I find it necessary to remain, Miss--Miss--"

"There, now," giggled the hotel fairy, pleasantly confused, "if I ain't always saying to Lydia--who is the housemaid--that strangers will call me Miss, though I should look married, having heard the wedding service three times, and the funeral words as often. My last name was Dumps, if you please, sir,--John Dumps, and a dear man he was, though not extraordinarily handsome. He left me this hotel--the Savoy Hotel," added the landlady, with emphasis, "and you can call me Mrs. Dumps."

The grave man listened impassively, with his keen eyes on the airy female, so gorgeously arrayed. He might have been of bronze for all the impression this speech seemed to make. Yet it conveyed to him the idea that Mrs. Dumps was a confirmed gossip, and sufficiently free with her tongue to tell him everything he wished to know concerning Crumel and its inhabitants. Making a mental note of this, the grey man reverted to his first statement. "I shall pay in advance, Mrs. Dumps," he remarked, "and the price."

"Seven shillings for supper and bed and breakfast. I can't say fairer than that, look as you like, Mr.--Mr.--lor, now, I don't know your--"

"Osip is my name," interrupted the man, and tendered two halfcrowns and a single florin.

Mrs. Dumps' claw-like fingers closed on the money in a way which suggested the miser. "Osip. Really! Osip! A strange name, Osip."

"I am a strange man," replied the other curtly, "would you mind getting me a glass of ginger beer, Mrs. Dumps?"

"Oh, Mr. Osip, really, Mr. Osip. Surely, port or whiskey at Christmas, let alone the freezing weather, and the frost causing thirst."

"I never drink alcohol, Mrs. Dumps."

"Lor now," said the landlady, confidentially, "if you aren't exactly like me on the mother's side, as I come of a full-blooded family given to choking and apoplexy. I don't believe in strong drink myself, Mr. Osip, say what you like."

"Then why sell it?" was the not unnatural question.

"I must live," said Mrs. Dumps, plaintively; then to avoid further remarks, she hopped into the bar like a wren, although her plumage was less sober. Presently she returned with the ginger beer. "And won't you take something to eat, Mr. Osip?" she asked, with her fashionable head on one side, more like a bird than ever.

"No, thank you," Osip paused, then faced her abruptly. "I am a stranger in Crumel and I think of taking a house here. Do you know of any to let, Mrs. Dumps?"

"My cousin does, Mr. Osip. Arthur Grinder, Grocer and Land-agent, with an insurance office and a dog-cart, in which he drives round our beautiful and interesting country. All orders-----"

Osip cut Mrs. Dumps short in her description, which was evidently culled from the local guide-book, or from one of

Mr. Grinder's pamphlets. "I shall see him to-morrow, if I stay," said he, hurriedly.

"But, surely, Mr. Osip, you'll stay, seeing you have paid?"

"Circumstances may arise which may make it necessary for me to return to London to-night. But I can afford the loss."

This speech made the landlady sweeter than ever. Apparently the stranger was rich, so she prepared to make herself aggressively agreeable. "If you become one of us," chirped Mrs. Dumps, more like a roguish bird than ever. "I dare say you'll like to know about the town."

Osip sat down near the fire and folded his arms.

"Information of that kind has its advantages," he said, dryly, "can you tell me anything about Crumel and its inhabitants?"

"Can I tell?" echoed Mrs. Dumps, shrilly contemptuous, "why, I was born and bred here. It is thirty years since I saw the light of day in dear Crumel. Thirty years," repeated Mrs. Dumps, challenging contradiction, which she seemed to expect with regard to her age. Osip might have suggested with some truth that she was over forty, but he did not judge it wise to interrupt the flowing current of her gossip. Nodding gravely he looked into the fire and Mrs. Dumps talked on rapidly, reverting again to the guide-book or to the pamphlet of Mr. Grinder, who was her cousin.

"Crumel," explained Mrs. Dumps, breathlessly, "has three thousand inhabitants, more or less, chiefly less, and the surrounding country is dotted with the delightful residence of well-to-do gentry. Formerly the place was called Legby, in the time of Charles the First; but when General Cromwell

visited the then village, during one of his wars, the prosperity increased so greatly through his having made it his headquarters, that the inhabitants, in compliment to the great man, called the then village, Cromwell, which by time has become corrupted to Crumel."

"Very interesting," yawned Osip, visibly bored.

"The minster is tenth century, and very fine," continued the guide-book, "and also Low Church, the vicar being the Rev. Nehemiah Clarke, who is quite a Puritan, out of compliment, no doubt, to Cromwell, or Crumel, to whom the town, formerly the village of Legby, owes its greatness. And they do say," continued Mrs. Dumps, dropping the guide-book, to become merely a gossip, "that Mr. Clarke's daughter, Miss Prudence,--did you ever hear such a name, sir, and she isn't a bit prudent, well, then, Miss Prudence would rather her pa was High Church. I dare say Mr. Ferdinand, who loves Miss Prudence, would like it also, he being quite artistic."

"You have mentioned Mr. Ferdinand several times, Mrs. Dumps. Who is he?"

"An orphan, and so is his sister, Miss Clarice Baird,--wealthy orphans, too, Mr. Osip, I assure you," and Mrs. Dumps nodded vigorously.

Osip showed that he was becoming weary of this conversation, since he was not gathering precisely the information he required. Abruptly he changed the subject. "In this lane----"

"Street," interpolated Mrs. Dumps, indignantly.

"Very good: street. And nearly opposite to this inn----"

"Hotel, if you please, Mr. Osip. The Savoy Hotel."

"So be it, Mrs. Dumps. Well, then, in this street and nearly opposite to the Savoy Hotel, there is a red brick mansion, which I should like to purchase, if it is for sale."

"Lor, now, how funny that is, say what you like, seeing it's the very house where the Baird orphans live."

"Alone, Mrs. Dumps?"

"Oh, dear me, no, sir. They board, so to speak, with their guardian, Mr. Henry Horran, who suffers from some disease the doctors can't put a name to. He's been ailing, off and on, for over ten years; but the doctors can't cure him nohow, not knowin' what's wrong with his inside. Mr. Ferdinand ought to find out, seeing he's lived with Mr. Horran all his life, though to be sure, he ain't old, being but three and twenty."

"Mr. Ferdinand Baird is not a doctor, then?"

"He will be some day, if his brains hold out. He's a medical student, and what you might call an apprentice to Dr. Jerce."

"Ha!" said Osip, quickly, "your local doctor?"

"Lor, no, whatever made you think that, Mr. Osip. Dr. Wentworth's our local, and he isn't bad, though I know more about insides than he does. But what can you expect, as I always say, when he's unmarried, and can't understand ladies? Why, Sampson Tait can cure better than our Dr. Wentworth."

"Sampson Tait?"

"Our chemist," explained Mrs. Dumps, "my second cousin on my father's side."

"You seem to have endless relatives, Mrs. Dumps."

"Heaps and heaps, and they're always dying, which makes mourning come expensive. But I'm lonely, all the same, Mr. Osip, I do assure you, as no one can live lightheartedly, after burying three husbands. Of course, there's my daughter Zara, but she's in London. Her pa had her christened Sarah, but Zara to my mind is more romantic."

"Undoubtedly. Well, then, this Dr. Jerce?"

"Not to know him," interrupted Mrs. Dumps, throwing up her hands, "is to argue yourself unknown. He's famous in Harley Street, London, and they do say that he'll be knighted some day soon. A great day for Crumel that will be, as he's a native, and we're proud of him, not that it's to be wondered at, for a better man never lived."

"A better doctor?" said Osip, inquiringly.

"A better man," reiterated Mrs. Dumps, firmly. "He's kind to the poor, and lavish with money, and why, with such a loving heart, as I know he has, he never will marry, beats me hollow. But they do say as he loves Miss Clarice, though he'll never get her, say what you like, she being engaged, I do hear, to a soldier officer, called Captain Anthony Ackworth, who fires guns at Gattlinsands, five miles away on the seashore."

"Oh, and is Miss Baird rich?"

"She will be and so will her brother, when they and reach the age of five and twenty, being twins, though she's got the brains of the two. Mr. Horran is the guardian, and looks after the money, but since he's ill--and Lord knows what his illness is about--I dare say Dr. Jerce helps him to see that things are kept straight. The Bairds were a Scotch family in

the time of James the First," added Mrs. Dumps, becoming again like a guide-book, "and that Stuart king gave them lands about Crumel, then the village of Legby. The old Manor-House is three miles from Crumel, and is let to a rich American, until the Baird orphans prefer to live in it; they meanwhile dwelling with Mr. Horran, who is their guardian by law constituted. That is Miss Clarice,--bless her--lives with Mr. Horran, but Mr. Ferdinand is usually in town, where he boards with Dr. Jerce, who is like a father to him, and I dare say would like to be a brother-in-law, not that he's likely to be so, with Captain Ackworth in the way."

"Does Dr. Jerce come down often?"

"Once a week at least, Mr. Osip, to see Mr. Horran. He's interested no end in the case, but he don't know what's wrong with the man."

"And Dr. Jerce is a good fellow," said Osip, thoughtfully.

"One of the very best. But won't you drink up your ginger beer, sir, and partake of some more? We must rejoice at Christmas time."

"I'll rejoice when I return," said Osip; then rose unexpectedly, and buttoned up his threadbare overcoat. "Meanwhile, I'll stroll through the town and inspect the shops."

"Be sure you look into the butcher's window," screamed Mrs. Dumps, as he passed out, "he being my nephew by his mother's side."

Osip made no reply, but vanished into the night, as Mrs. Dumps fluttered back to the bar, to charm fresh customers. A clouded sky revealed neither moon nor stars, but the hard snow emitted a kind of sepulchral radiance, which created a

luminous atmosphere. By an odd inversion the light seemed to come from below, instead of being shed from above, as usual, and the effect was weird in the extreme.

Walking towards the red-brick mansion, Osip pondered over what he had heard from the chattering landlady, and congratulated himself on securing information, while not appearing to seek for the same. Opposite the Georgian mansion, he halted for a few seconds, and, as there appeared to be no one about, he made up his mind to venture into the grounds. Noiselessly opening the gate, he skirted the leafless hedge, and reached the side of the house. Here he found two French windows, giving on to a miniature terrace. The blinds were not down, nor were the curtains drawn, so the lamp-light poured forth across the snow in a gleaming stream. Osip cautiously peered in, and beheld Jerce talking to a pretty young girl, whom he took to be Clarice Baird. Without hesitation, he pressed his ear against the wall, and listened with all his ears.

CHAPTER II

AN ADVENTURE

"I am extremely puzzled," said Dr. Jerce, scratching his plump chin with his right fore-finger--a favourite gesture of his.

"Oh!--a clever man like you."

"Ah-a,--what pleasant feminine flattery."

"The truth. You are celebrated."

"Humph! So is a charlatan, if he advertises himself sufficiently."

"Charlatans don't cure people as you do, doctor,--nor can they ever hope to be knighted, like someone I know."

"Well," answered the stout man, again tickling his chin. "I am not so sure of that. Humbug often succeeds, where merit fails. Perhaps," his little black eyes twinkled, "perhaps that is why I can look forward to being Sir Daniel Jerce."

The girl looked closely into his bland face. "A charlatan would never confess to being puzzled."

"In this case," Jerce shrugged, and resumed a quarter-deck walk in the long drawing-room, "the Archangel Gabriel would be puzzled."

"What can be the matter with Uncle Henry?" observed his listener, pensively.

"Ask the Archangel Gabriel, Miss Baird."

"Miss Baird?" Like a woman her train of thought switched up a siding.

Jerce coloured all over his large waxen face, and he gulped with embarrassment. "Of course, I have known you since you were a little girl," he began, awkwardly, "but----"

She cut him short. "Then why not call me Clarice?"

"Only too delighted," he stuttered. "Clarice, then."

"Clarice *now*, I rather think," she laughed, and, wondering at the confusion of this usually self-contained physician, returned forthwith to the topic which had created

this conversation. "What can be the matter with Uncle Henry?" she said again.

Jerce became the medical man at once, and shook his head. "Ten years of attendance on Horran have left me where I was at the beginning."

"How strange."

"Everything connected with medicine is strange. The human body is a box of tricks, with which we play, in the dark."

"A box of bricks, you mean."

"As you please. We doctors build up the bodies of the sick, so I suppose flesh and bones, muscles and nerves, are the bricks. But this case--Horran's case--humph!" he resumed his walk with knitted brows, "yes, quite so. I confess that a post-mortem would settle the matter."

Clarice rose with a horrified look. "What a cold-blooded speech. He is your oldest friend."

"Forgive me. Science is not quite human at times. Of course, I am here to cure Horran, not to kill him. I should indeed regret losing my best, and, as you say, my oldest friend. But how can I cure a man, when I don't know what is the matter with him?"

"What does Dr. Wentworth say?"

Jerce looked at the girl's pretty face and fairly laughed. "Wentworth is not a prospective knight," said he, dryly.

"Which means--?"

"That I don't wish to boast."

This time Clarice coloured. "I beg your pardon, doctor. I know that you are everybody and that Dr. Wentworth is nobody. You live in Harley Street and attend to titled people,

while he works in a quiet Essex town amongst the middle-class and the poor. All the same," she was determined to have the last word, "the mouse may be able to assist the lion."

"I prefer a feminine mouse," said the doctor, smiling. "Suppose you assist me by detailing exactly what has happened."

Clarice leaned an elbow on the mantelpiece, and absently ruffled her brown hair before replying. "Mr. Horran has been complaining of headaches," she said at length, "and once or twice he has been sick. Also on rising suddenly from a chair, he has always felt giddy."

"You tell me nothing new, Miss--I mean Clarice. For ten years Horran has suffered in this way. Humph! The attacks of giddiness have not been so frequent, Wentworth tells me."

"No. Only every now and then."

"Humph! And his behaviour?"

"Well," Clarice hesitated, "he has been a trifle excited at times, and by Dr. Wentworth's advice he gave up his one glass of whisky at night."

"I see," Jerce once more scratched his chin. "Alcohol excites him."

"Anything unusual seems to excite him, doctor. Mr. Horran gets quite hysterical at times, and is always thinking of his health."

"Hypochondria!" muttered Jerce, with his eyes on the ground. "And on this particular occasion?"

"Didn't Dr. Wentworth tell you? Mr. Horran fell down in an epileptic fit and bit his tongue. We got him to bed, and sent

for Dr. Wentworth, who insisted upon wiring for you."

"Quite so--quite so. Wentworth knows that I am deeply interested in this most mysterious case. What do these symptoms mean? Whence do they arise? I wish--" he cast a look on the girl, "no, I won't suggest a post-mortem again. All the same only a post-mortem can explain these things."

"Oh, doctor, do you think he will die?"

"No! no! There, there," the doctor patted her hand, "don't cry. Horran may go on living for the next twenty years--as he is only fifty-four, I don't see why he shouldn't."

"Then you can't see death?"

"I can't see death, or life, or anything, but a series of most puzzling symptoms, which neither I, nor Wentworth, nor the whole College of Surgeons can understand. However, we'll drop the subject just now, and think of tea."

"Oh, doctor, how can you think of food when--"

"When my patient is sleeping quietly. Why shouldn't I? There's nothing to be done until he awakes. Then I'll make another examination, although I don't expect I'll learn anything. I return to town," Jerce consulted a handsome gold watch, "by the seven train."

"It is very good of you to have come down so promptly."

"Not at all. I would go to the ends of the earth at a moment's notice, to attend to so interesting a case. Ha! ha! Cold-blooded science again, Clarice, you see. Come, come, let us say that I came willingly to see my old and valued friend, Henry Horran."

"Doctor, you are a great man."

"Flattering--very flattering. And why?"

"Great men, I have always read and heard, will never spare anyone in their aim to attain their ends."

"Humph. That is not quite so flattering. And my ends?"

"You want to find out the cause of this trouble."

"Naturally. I can't cure Horran unless I do."

"Yes. But you are more curious to learn the reason for the disease than to cure him."

"You wrong me," said the doctor quickly, "and to prove that you wrong me, I shall assuredly cure Horran, if it be in the power of man to set him on his legs again. Now you had better go and have some tea and toast. I'll return to Horran's room, and see Wentworth when he comes in."

"I can't eat, doctor," said Clarice, making no motion to obey. "That is foolish. Starving yourself will not cure your guardian. I dare say you are fond of him. Eh?"

"Have you known me more than twenty years to ask such a question? Of course, I am very fond of uncle Henry. He is the best of men."

"I agree with you there," said Jerce, earnestly, "but I don't think your brother agrees with you. That is strange."

"Why so, doctor?"

"You and Ferdy are twins,--twins may have the same likes and dislikes."

Clarice laughed. "For a clever medical man that is certainly not a clever speech. Twins are often alike in looks, and entirely different in disposition."

"I am aware of that," responded Jerce, calmly, "but I have always noted that you and Ferdy think alike, or did, until lately."

"That is because Ferdy is removed from my influence," said Clarice, sadly. "He always followed my lead. But since he has gone to town to stop with you and become a student of medicine, he thinks very differently from what I do. Naturally, perhaps, since he is seeing more of the world than I, and is a man."

"You should have been the man, Clarice, and Ferdy, the woman. I wish to do my best for your brother, because he is your brother, but----" Jerce made a gesture of annoyance, "Ferdy is so terribly weak."

"Don't be hard on him, doctor," she pleaded. "Ferdy never got on well with uncle Henry."

"He gets on with no one, my dear, save with those people who pander to his weaknesses." Clarice clasped her hands and looked anxious. "Doctor, there is nothing very wrong with Ferdy?" she asked, faltering. "No! no!" Jerce stopped in his walk to pat her shoulder. "I look after him as much as I can. Yet I must not disguise from you, Clarice, that Ferdy is--well, rather wild."

"Rather wild," echoed the girl. "He frequents music-halls, and goes with people who make pleasure their aim in life. Also he has sometimes been the worse for alcohol. These things, Clarice, do not lead to peace, or to greatness."

The girl sat down and covered her face. "When Ferdy came down yesterday, I noticed that he was not himself. He seems to have something on his mind."

Jerce shrugged his shoulders. "I dare say he is ashamed of himself."

"Can't something be done? If I spoke--"

"No, my dear," said the doctor, very decidedly, "you will only make matters worse. Ferdy, for the last twelve months, has been out of leading strings, and if you try, however delicately, to lecture him, he will only become obstreperous. But you need not be alarmed. I'll do what I can. I would do much for you, Clarice."

There was a note in his voice which made the girl look up. The usually pale face of the doctor was red, and his eyes had a look in them, which she was woman enough to understand. Rising with a nervous laugh, Clarice grappled with the situation at once. She did not wish to lose her amiable companion in a disappointed suitor. "Do what you can for Ferdy, doctor, and I'll ever be your--friend."

"But suppose I--"

"Friend, doctor," reiterated Clarice, steadily, and withdrew the hand he had clasped too warmly. "I wonder," stammered the medical man, nervously, "if you understand exactly what I mean." Clarice smiled. "I should not be a woman else. I understand, and so I say--friend."

"There is someone else?" asked Jerce, chagrined. Clarice turned the leading question with an embarrassing laugh. "There is always someone else, and in this instance the someone else, is my brother Ferdinand. I rely on you to bring him to his senses."

"Well," said Jerce, struggling back to calmness, "that may be difficult. You see, Miss Baird--"

"Clarice."

"No," said Jerce, steadily, "never again, until I have the right to call you Clarice."

"What right? No, no! that's a foolish question," she added hurriedly. "Doctor, doctor, do not put your feelings into words. Let things remain as they are. Help Ferdy and cure Uncle Henry, and then--"

"And then?" he bent forward eagerly.

"Then I shall ask you to dance at my wedding," replied the girl, and fairly ran out of the room. Jerce was so determined that she could scarcely avoid hearing him speak plainer than she wished. And if he did speak out, the answer her emotion would force her to give him, would inevitably create a disagreeable feeling, if not a positive breach of friendship. This was not to be thought of, as Jerce was necessary both to help poor weak Ferdy Baird, and to cure Henry Horran of his mysterious disease. Discretion, as Clarice rightly thought, was the better part of valour in this especial instance, and therefore she deliberately ran away. Jerce was left alone.

Naturally, he thought that he was unobserved, and the watcher at the window could see the various expressions which chased each other across his usually calm face. Judging from these, Jerce was annoyed that he had spoken so inopportunistly. The fruit was not yet ripe, as he reflected, after recalling the few words he and Clarice had exchanged. First, he would have to bring Ferdy back to the paths of virtue; well, what then? Clarice might--on the other hand she might not. Certainly, she had laughed away his leading question, but also she had invited him to dance at her wedding--also laughingly. No! there could be no one else, and if Jerce saved the two men in which she was most interested, she might reward him by loving him, as he

wished to be loved. Thanks to the gossip of Mrs. Dumps, the watcher at the window knew well that Jerce was dwelling in a fool's paradise, but it was not his intention, or will, to inform Jerce of the gunner officer at Gattlinsands, five miles away by the seashore.

Jerce, even though presumably alone, did not allow all his feelings to be seen on his face. But he felt that the room was stifling in spite of its being a cold winter's evening, and opened the window to gain a breath of sharp air. As he stepped out, he was suddenly grasped from behind, and the skilful exercise of a Ju-Jitsu motion placed him prostrate at the mercy of his assailant. In the light of the drawing-room lamps streaming through the open window, Jerce could see that the man wore grey clothes. He would have spoken, or would have called for assistance, but the grey man placed his hand on what is called Adam's apple, and paralyzed by pressure the vocal chords. Jerce lay voiceless and motionless, as though in a state of catalepsy, while the man went systematically through his pockets with the dexterity of a thief. In less time than it takes to tell, the assailant had failed to find what he sought, and, rising quickly, disappeared like a shadow, or a ghost. All the time he had spoken no word, and had not allowed his face to be seen. As his retreating feet scrunched the snow, Jerce, too shaken to rise immediately, lay where he was, wondering what had taken place, and wondering, most of all, why this very dexterous thief had gone through his pockets so thoroughly. Then he rose to his feet and found that his gold watch, his not inconsiderable sum of money, his rings and his silver match-box were all safe. Evidently, the assailant was no

common thief. He had desired to find something, and had failed to find it, but what that something might be, Jerce could not think.

When he came quite to himself--for the shock of the assault had somewhat stunned him--he rushed along the terrace, and into the garden, which was parted by a single iron railing from the lane. But there was no one to be seen. The man in grey had vanished swiftly into the night, and Jerce could no more guess in which direction he had gone, than he could surmise why the man had assaulted him. He stared from the elevation upon which he stood, over the spectral wastes of snow, and then turned to re-enter. For the moment it was in his mind to send for the police; but he could give so scanty a description of his daring opponent, that it hardly seemed worth while. Not even the cleverest detective could recognise the man, from the mere fact that he wore grey clothes.

However, just as Jerce turned the corner of the terrace to re-enter by the still open French window, he heard the click of the iron gate as it swung to. A tall figure walked briskly up the snowy path, and, seeing him at the corner of the terrace, advanced towards him with an ejaculation of astonishment.

"Doctor," exclaimed the new-comer, bending forward to examine the features of the outraged man in the uncertain light. "I knew you were coming down, but I did not expect to find you out of doors on this freezing night."

"Ferdinand!" gasped Jerce, and stretching out his hand, he gripped the young man by his overcoat collar. Before Baird could expostulate, he was drawn unresistingly along

towards the light streaming from the open window, and Jerce was looking fiercely at his tall form and grey clothes. "Tell me why you knocked me down just now?" demanded the doctor, much ruffled, and short of breath.

Ferdinand started back in genuine surprise. "I knock you down?" he repeated. "Why, doctor, you must be out of your senses. Why on earth should I knock you down?"

"To search my pockets for some reason."

Baird laughed at the monstrous charge. "Do you accuse me of robbery?"

"Oh, no! You took nothing, but you searched me. Why?" and Jerce looked closely at the handsome, weak face of the spruce young gentleman.

"But that you are a rabid teetotaler, doctor," said Ferdinand, with a shrug, "I should think you had been drinking. I have been for the last hour at the vicarage seeing Prudence, and before that I visited Mrs. Dumps' Savoy Hotel to look up the last train to town to-night. I have just returned, and you accuse me of assaulting you. It's too ridiculous!" And Baird, annoyed at being kept standing in the cold, began to fume like a spoilt child.

"I tell you, Ferdinand, that you knocked me down, here--where we are standing, and searched my pockets thoroughly. I recognise you by the grey overcoat you are wearing, although you were clever enough to hide your face."

"Grey clothes, eh?" mused Ferdinand, slowly. "There may be something in what you say, after all. A tall man in grey clothes, hat and all, passed me in the High Street, near Grinder's shop."

"Did you see his face?" asked Jerce, doubtfully.

"Yes. I don't usually take notice of a man's face, but this chap was a stranger here, and looked like a Londoner. He had a lean face, so far as I could see--yes, and a small black moustache. And--and,--oh, yes, doctor, there was a criss-cross scar on his cheek, I fancy. But, of course, he passed too quickly for me to observe him closely."

"A scar on his cheek," said the doctor, loosening his grip. "Humph! I congratulate you on your rapid powers of observation. Only a woman could have gathered so much in one moment. I ask your pardon, Ferdinand. Doubtless, it was this fellow who knocked me down."

"And here," Ferdinand looked round, "in our grounds. What cheek. I expected he wished to rob you."

"If so, he certainly did not fulfil his intention, even though he had me at his mercy," said Jerce, dryly, and stepped into the room.

"Shall I go for the police, doctor?"

"No. We'll say no more about it, my boy."

"Do you know this man?" asked Baird, puzzled.

"I fancy I do, if you describe the scar accurately."

"Oh, it was a criss-cross scar, right enough. But if he did not rob you, or wish to rob you, why did he go through your pockets."

"That," said Jerce, with emphasis, "is as much a mystery to me, as it is to you."

CHAPTER III

TWINS

Next morning, Clarice and her brother were at breakfast together in a cheerful little octagon-shaped room, all enamelled white panels, delicately painted wreaths of flowers and profuse gilding. More snow had fallen during the night, and through the tall, narrow windows could be seen a spotless world, almost as white as the breakfast-room itself. But a cheerful fire of oak logs blazing in the brass basket, where the bluish tiles took the smoke, and in the centre of the apartment a round table, large enough for two, was covered with dainty linen upon which stood a silver service, delicate china, and many appetizing dishes. Clarice was a notable housekeeper, and knowing that Ferdinand was fond of a good breakfast, used her best endeavours to provide him with the toothsome food he loved. And this was somewhat in the nature of a bribe.

"By jove!" said the young man, attacking a devilled kidney, "Jerce's housekeeper doesn't feed me like this."

"Then why don't you come down here oftener, Ferdy, and allow me to feed you," suggested Clarice, artfully, and filled him another cup of hot fragrant coffee.

"What rot--as if I could. Jerce keeps me at work, I can tell you. I scarcely have a minute to myself."

"And the minutes you have are given to other people than your sister," said Clarice, dryly.

"Ho! ho!" Ferdinand chuckled. "Jealous of Prudence."

"No! I should like to see you married to Prudence. She would keep you in order."

"Bosh! Jerce does that."

"I doubt it, after what he told me last night."

Knife and fork fell from Ferdinand's hands, and his rosy complexion became as white as the snow out of doors. "Wh-a-t--what--did he tell you?" he quavered, while Clarice looked at him, astonished.

"Only that you are a trifle wild," she hastened to explain. "Why should you look so alarmed?"

"I'm--I'm not alarmed," denied Baird, and absently wiped his forehead with his napkin. "That is, of course if Jerce talks about my being wild to you, and you speak to Prudence, she'll give me the go-by, like a shot. Prudence is awfully jealous."

"I'm not in the habit of telling tales," said Clarice, dryly.

"Jerce is, then. Why can't he hold his tongue?"

"Is what he says true?"

"I don't exactly know what he did say," said Ferdinand, irritably, and pushed back his plate. "You've spoilt my breakfast. I don't like shocks."

"Why should you receive a shock from my very simple observation?"

"Because--well, because of Prudence. I'm fond of Prudence, and I don't want her to know that I--well, that I--enjoy myself."

Clarice tried to catch his eye, so as to see if he was speaking the truth, but Ferdinand evaded her gaze, and rising, went to the fireplace, where he lighted a cigarette. The girl remained seated where she was, resting her elbows