

“ FERDIE.”

By F. ANSTEY.

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I HAD better say at once that I don’t set up to be literary. I get quite enough of pen and ink all day at the bank, and when I *am* free, I like to be out in the fresh air as long as I can.

So you will not expect “style” or “literary composition” or anything of that sort in this; it is just an account, as exact as I can make it, of a very unpleasant experience I had last Christmas, and you must let me tell it in my own way. If you think, as very likely you may, that I cut rather a poor figure in the course of it, all I ask is that you will kindly suspend your judgment of me till you come to the finish. Because you will see then — at least I hope you will — that I couldn’t very well have behaved any differently.

My name is Filleter — Lionel Alchin Filleter, if you want it in full — I am about twenty-four, and unmarried. My elder sister Louisa and I share a semi-detached villa in Woodlands Avenue, Cricklebury Park, within easy reach of the City by rail or motor-bus. Our house is called “Ullswater,” and next door is “Buttermere”; why, I don’t know, as neither boasts so much as a basin of gold-fish. But the name was painted on the gate when we came, and as we couldn’t think of anything better, we stuck to it.

We have quite a decent back garden for the size of the house, and when there was nothing doing in the way of games, I spent



“I PUT IN THIS PARTICULAR ROOT BY ITSELF, JUST UNDER THE DRAWING-ROOM WINDOW.”

most of my spare time in it. In fact, I got rather keen at last, and my bank being in the City, I used to look in as often as possible at Messrs. Protheroe and Morris’s well-known auction-rooms in Cheapside, on the off-chance of picking up a bargain. Sometimes I did; in March of last year, for instance, I happened to drop in while they were selling a consignment of late Dutch and Cape bulbs and roots, and secured a bag of a hundred miscellaneous anemone roots for half a crown. The lot was described in the catalogue as “*Mixed. All fine sorts, including St. Brigid, Fulgens, etc. Believed to contain some new varieties.*”

If you have ever seen any anemone roots you will know what black, dried-up-looking things they are, so queerly shaped that one can never be sure which end up to plant them. I planted mine the day after I got them home, along my S.E. border, where they would get plenty of sun, and make a good show in front of the phloxes the following June. Or rather I planted all but one there, that one being so much larger and more fantastically shaped than the rest that I thought it might possibly turn out to be a quite unique variety, like, as I told Louisa at the time, the celebrated “*Narcissus Mackintoshi Splendescens*,” which was bought in a mixed lot at an auction for a few shillings,

and now fetches as much as five pounds a bulb!

So I put in this particular root by itself, just under the drawing-room window, with a labelled peg to mark the spot. Louisa rather jeered at my expectations; she has very little faith in me as a gardener, and besides, she takes no proper pride in the garden itself, or she would never have persisted as she did, in letting Togo out for a run in it the last thing at night. Togo is Louisa's black dachs, and, as I understand the breed was originally trained to hunt for truffles, you could hardly expect such things as bulbs and roots to get a fair chance if there is any truth in hereditary instinct. But Louisa objected to his running about in front, because of motor-cars.

Still, I'm bound to say that he did not seem to have interfered with any of the anemones, all of which came up well—except the root I had had such hopes of, which never came up at all. And, as I couldn't fairly blame Togo for that, and Louisa seemed to have forgotten all about the subject, I didn't think it worth while to refer to it.

I soon forgot my disappointment myself, until I was clearing up my beds in November and came upon the peg. Then I decided to leave the root undisturbed, just in case it might be some variety that took a considerable time to flower. And then I forgot it once more.

Things went on as usual until it was Christmas Eve; Louisa, I remember, had been putting together our Christmas presents, among which were some toys for little Peggy and Joan Dudlow.

The Dudlows, I should mention, are far the most important and influential people in Cricklebury Park, where the local society is above the usual suburban level. They live at "Ingleholme," a handsome gabled house standing in its own grounds at the end of the Avenue. Dudlow is a well-to-do silk merchant, and his eldest daughter Violet is—but I simply can't trust myself to describe her—I know I should never get hold of just the right words. Well, Louisa had gone up to her room, leaving me alone in the drawing-room with an injunction not to sit up late.

It was getting late—very nearly twelve o'clock indeed—and I was thinking of turning in as soon as I had read another page or two of a book I was dipping into. It was a rum old book which belonged to Anthony Casbird, our curate at St. Philip's. To look at Casbird, you wouldn't believe he

was bookish, being so ruddy in the face, but he has a regular library at his lodgings, and is always at me for only reading what he calls "modern trash." So, as I happened to let out that I had never heard of a writer called Sir Thomas Browne, he had insisted on lending me one of his books, with some notes of his own for a paper he was going to read at some Literary Society.

It had a jaw-breaking title: "Pseudodoxia Epidemica, or Enquiries into very many received Tenents and commonly presumed Truths," and had been published so long ago as 1646.

Now when I do take up a book, I must say I prefer something rather more up-to-date, and this was written in such an old-fashioned, long-winded way that I didn't get on with it.

But I had come to a chapter which seemed more promising, being headed, "Of sundry tenents concerning vegetables or plants, which examined, prove either false or dubious." I thought I might get a tip or two for the garden out of it.

However, it was not what I should call "practical." It began like this: "*Many mola's and false conceptions there are of Mandrakes, the first from great Antiquity, conceiveth the Roote thereof resembleth the shape of man.*" . . . and, further on, "*a Catacresticall and farre derived similitude, it holds with man; that is, in a bifurcation or division of the roote into two parts, which some are contente to call thighes.*" . . . *The third assertion affirmeth the roots of Mandrakes doe make a noyse or give a shreeke upon eradication, which is indeed ridiculous, and false below confute;* . . . *The last concerneth the danger ensuing, that there followes an hazard of life to them that pull it up, that some evill fate pursues them,*" and so on.

I found a loose note of Casbird's to the effect that, to guard against this danger, a black dog was usually employed to pull up the root, which apparently was fatal to the dog; while its owners "*stopped their own eares for feare of the terreble shriek or cry of this Mandrack.*"

Somehow all this vaguely suggested something, though for a while I could not remember what. Everyone knows how worrying that is, and I could not bring myself to get out of my chair and go to bed until I had found the missing clue. And at last I hit on it. The anemone root, of course! I recollected now that Louisa, who had had a low opinion of it from the first, had remarked that it was shaped "exactly like a horrid

little man." Not that I saw much resemblance myself, though it certainly was forked, and even had excrescences on each side which, to a lively imagination, might pass for arms. But no doubt in old Sir Thomas's time a good many fairly intelligent people would have sworn it was a Mandrake, and been terrified out of their lives at it!

Now I came to think over it, I was rather hazy, even then, as to what kind of creature they supposed a Mandrake to be exactly—though I gathered that it must be some peculiarly malignant sort of little demon.

I was amusing myself by these speculations when I was startled for the moment by a succession of short sharp shrieks, ending in a prolonged and blood-curdling yell. Only for the moment, because I remembered at

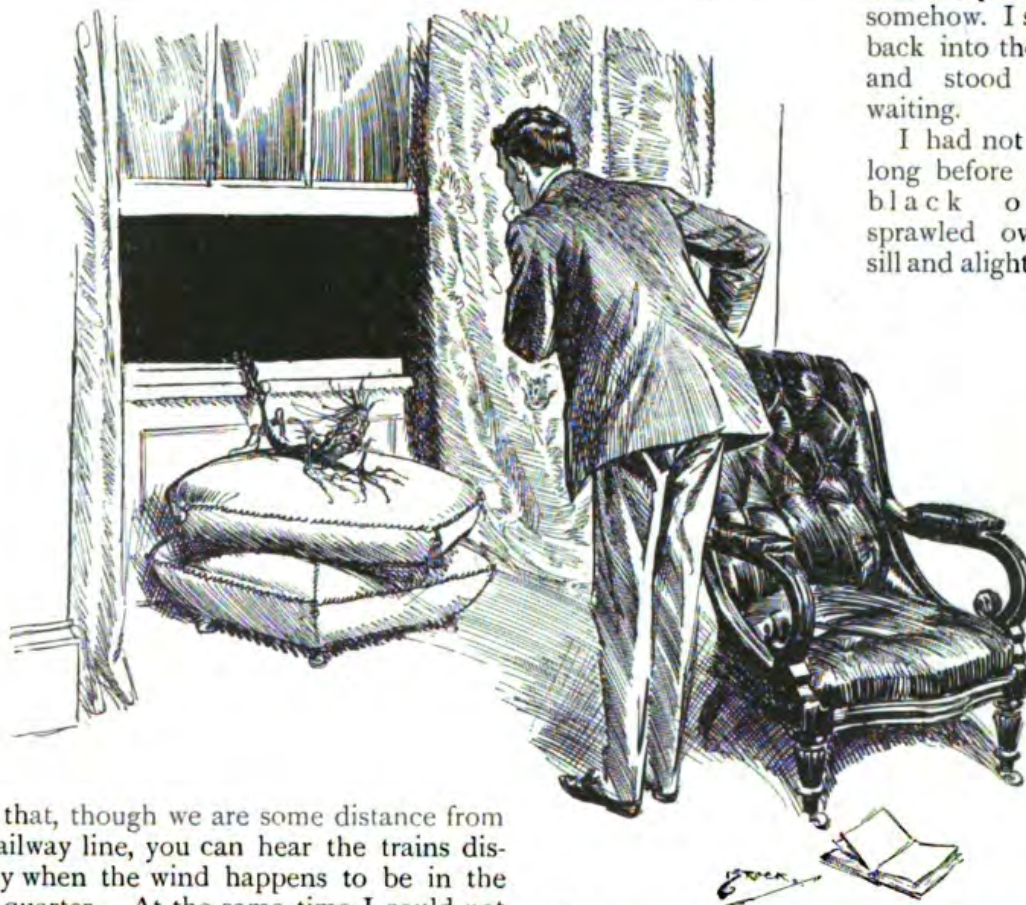
that was thrown on the grass-plot by the lamp behind me. It looked to me like Togo. Louisa must have turned him out as usual, and the servants have forgotten to let him in again, which was careless of them. He had had a fit, as had happened once before, and the screams I had heard had been his. Now I should have to go down and see after the poor brute. . . .

But I never went. For, as I stood there at the window leaning out, I heard another sound below which drove all thought of Togo completely out of my head—a stealthy rustling and scrabbling, as if some large reptile—a chameleon for choice—were clambering up the ivy towards the window.

I knew I ought to shut it before the thing, whatever it was, could get in, but I couldn't.

I felt paralyzed somehow. I stepped back into the room and stood there, waiting.

I had not to wait long before a small black object sprawled over the sill and alighted with



"A SMALL BLACK OBJECT SPRAWLED OVER THE SILL AND ALIGHTED WITH A FLOP ON THE OTTOMAN BENEATH."

once that, though we are some distance from the railway line, you can hear the trains distinctly when the wind happens to be in the right quarter. At the same time I could not help fancying that the noise had seemed nearer than usual—that it sounded as if it might almost have come from my own garden.

I grew so uneasy at last that I threw up the window, to see if anything had happened.

All was quiet again now; but, as my eyes became accustomed to the darkness, I thought I could make out a small black form lying motionless in the patch of light

a flop on the ottoman beneath. I cannot give any idea of its appearance except by saying that it was a wizened little imp of a thing, as black as your hat, and hideously ugly. As it recovered its balance and stood there, blinking its beady little eyes in the lamplight, I noticed that its expression was not so much malignant as obsequious, and

even abject. Though I didn't like it any the better for that. And then it spoke.

"I hope you were not alarmed by the noise," it said, in a soft reedy pipe. "It was only me."

I can't say that I was exactly surprised at hearing it speak. I did not know enough about Mandrakes for that. But it was clear enough that old Sir Thomas Browne had been wrong for once in his life, for this thing couldn't possibly be anything else but a Mandrake. I did not answer it—what *can* you say to a Mandrake?

It jumped off the ottoman as I fell back into my chair; then it swarmed up the table-leg with a horrible agility, hoisted itself over the edge, and sat down humbly on a wooden box of puzzle cubes.

"You see," it went on apologetically, "when that dog of yours dragged me out of bed so suddenly, I couldn't help calling out. I do not ask you to punish it—I wish to make no complaint—but it bit me severely in the back."

There was something so sneaky and cringing in its manner that I began to feel less afraid of it. "It's been punished enough already," I said shortly. "It's probably dead by this time."

"Oh, surely not!" it said, squirming. "It has merely fainted. Though I can't think why."

"You don't seem to be aware," I replied, without disguising the disgust I felt, "that your appearance is enough to upset anyone."

"I'm afraid," it admitted, as it began to brush the mould from its frightful little twiggy legs, "my person has indeed been a little neglected. But I shall be presentable enough, after I have been a few days under your kindly care."

I let it know pretty plainly that if it imagined I was going to take it in, it was considerably mistaken—which seemed to disappoint it.

"But why not?" it said, and blinked at me again. "Why can't you take me in?"

"Because," I said bluntly, "a house like this is not the place for creatures of your sort."

"Oh," it replied, "but I am accustomed to roughing it, and I would put up with any drawbacks for the pleasure of your society!"

The calm cheek of this was almost too much for me. "I dare say you would," I said, "but you're not going to get the chance. What I meant was, as a Mandrake—which you can't deny you are—you are not a fit person to be admitted into any respectable household."

It protested volubly that it couldn't answer for other Mandrakes, it could only assure me that its own character was beyond reproach. It added that it had felt strongly attracted to me from the moment it saw my face, and its instinct told it that I should reciprocate the feeling in time.

I made the obvious retort that if its instinct told it that, it lied; I said I had no wish to argue with it, but it had better understand that it must leave the house at once.

"Don't repulse me!" it whined. "I want you to treat me as a friend. Call me 'Ferdie.' Do call me 'Ferdie'!"

All I said to that was that, if it didn't clear out of its own accord, I should be obliged to take it by the scruff of its neck and chuck it out of the window, which, as I pointed out, was conveniently open. Though, to tell you the truth, this was only bluff, for I wouldn't have touched the thing for any money.

Then the plausible little beast tried to work on my pity; there had been no rain for days, it said, and it was feeling so parched and dry, and generally exhausted. "Well," I said, relenting a little, "I'll give you just one whisky and soda, and after that you must go." But it refused anything but plain soda, with which I filled a tumbler to the brim, and the Mandrake stooped down and drained it greedily with great gulps.

The soda-water seemed to buck it up in a most extraordinary way. Its shrivelled little form began to fill out, and its extremities to look more like hands and feet, while its height actually increased by several inches. But in other respects I could see no improvement.

"I feel a different being," it informed me complacently. "It's just occurred to me," it went on, "that the prejudice which I can't help seeing you have against me may be due to my want of clothing. Underground that did not signify, but, in the world above, I quite recognise that the proprieties should be observed. Only I don't see—ah, the very things. . . . Will you excuse me?"

It had suddenly caught sight of a large Golliwogg, which I had bought for Peggy, and which was lying on the table. Before I could interfere the Mandrake had deftly stripped the doll of its blue coat, white shirt, and red trousers, and arrayed itself in them. "Now," it remarked proudly, "you will have no need to blush for me!"

I think I never saw anything more outrageously grotesque than the spectacle that Mandrake presented in the Golliwogg's

garments, which hung about its meagre body in loose folds. But it strutted about with immense satisfaction. "Quite a fair fit," it said, trying to twist its ugly head round and see its back. "Though I'm not sure there isn't a wrinkle between the shoulders. Do you notice it?"

I said I thought it need not distress itself about that, and again ordered it to get out.

"But where am I to get to?" it said; "I can't go back to the garden *now*. And it's *your* garden, which surely gives me some claim on your hospitality!"

I said it had no claims on me whatever; if anyone was responsible for it, Messrs. Protheroe and Morris were the proper parties to apply to, and I gave it their address in Cheapside. Perhaps this was hardly fair on the firm, who, of course, would not have sold such a thing, knowingly, as an anemone root—but I had to get out of it somehow.

I did not pitch it out of window; I showed it to the front door, like an ordinary caller.

"Then you cast me from you," it sighed in the passage, as I undid the chain. "Are we to meet as strangers henceforth?"

"If we ever meet at all," I said, "which I see no necessity for. Good night." But it still lingered on the door-mat.

"Ah, well," it said, "it cannot be that I shall find all hearts as hard as yours. Did you say Cheapside?"

I said if it had any difficulty in finding the way it had better ask a constable. It thanked me profusely, begged me not to trouble to come to the gate with it, and left.

With all my instinctive repugnance, I could not help feeling slightly ashamed of myself; it did look such a forlorn and pitiable little wretch as it shambled down the path and slipped through the bars of the gate!

But what could I do? To keep it was out of the question; Louisa would never stand it—the thing would get on her nerves. And then there were the Dudlows. What would Violet, what would her father and mother, think of me if they discovered that I was harbouring such a beastly thing as a Mandrake?

I chained and barred the door, congratulating myself that, so far

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as I was concerned, the affair was done with. And then I went to bed, deciding that it would be better not to mention the matter to Louisa.

The next day of course was Christmas. I was sitting by the fire in the dining-room, which faces the road. Louisa was at church, and I ought to have been there, too. I didn't quite know why I hadn't gone, as I should certainly have met Violet there, and perhaps walked home with her afterwards—but I supposed I hadn't felt up to it.

Anyhow there I was, in an arm-chair with a pipe and a newspaper, when all at once I became aware of a low tapping at the bow-window behind my back. I didn't look round, for I had a sort of presentiment of what it was. And then, in the bevelled plate-glass mirror of the sideboard opposite, I saw reflected a flash of scarlet and blue among the variegated laurels in one of the window-boxes, and I knew for certain that that



"IT STILL LINGERED ON THE DOOR-MAT."

infernal little Mandrake had turned up again. The tapping grew louder, but I took no notice, hoping that it would soon get tired of it and go away.

However, it persevered until I began to feel alarmed lest it should attract the attention of the people opposite, who are rather given to gossiping. So I got up and let the thing in, and asked it what the deuce it wanted now—for I was extremely annoyed. Without waiting for an invitation it took the arm-chair opposite mine, with a cough which was either deferential or due to the tobacco-smoke. Then it explained that its intrusion, which it hoped I would overlook, had been prompted by an irresistible impulse to wish me the Compliments of the Season.

Of course I knew it had some deeper motive than that, and I made no answer, beyond grunting. It appeared that it had gone to Cheapside, but had found neither Mr. Protheroe nor Mr. Morris at home—which did not surprise me. It had been wandering about all night, though it had contrived—it did not mention how, and I asked no questions—to refresh itself with some cocoa and a slice of cake at a coffee-stall. And, its appetite having once been aroused, it had begun, it said, to feel hungry again. Might it trespass on me for a meal? It would be deeply grateful, even if I could do no more for it than a mince-pie.

I declined. Not from stinginess, but a conviction that it would be the thin end of the wedge. I might have it staying on to lunch—and there were Louisa's feelings to be considered. It took the refusal meekly enough, and said it had another favour to ask of me. Perhaps I had not observed that it had been putting on flesh with a rapidity which it could only attribute to the currant cake?

I had already noticed a change. It was now at least two feet high; its blue jacket was reduced to a bolero, while its red breeches were hardly bigger than bathing-drawers. I forget if it still retained its shirt or not. The Mandrake represented that if this shrinkage were to continue, it would soon be ashamed to present itself in public, and asked if I could recommend it to a really good tailor—"not the one who made those things you have on," it explained. "I prefer a quieter style myself."

I knew there was no fault to be found with the clothes I was wearing, a neat suit in quite the right shade of green, and I might have shut the little beggar up pretty sharply if I had chosen. But after all, what *did* it matter what a Mandrake thought of my things?

"I feel sure I should be a success in society," it went on, wriggling with suppressed eagerness as it spoke, "if I were only decently dressed. I have many gifts, and even accomplishments. All my tastes are innocent and refined. You would find we had much in common, if you would only try to regard me as a friend. If," it entreated, with a smile which it evidently intended to be winning, but which came out on its gnarled wooden countenance as a revoltingly offensive leer, "If I could once hear you call me 'Ferdie'!"

It heard me call it several names—but "Ferdie" was not one of them. "Then do I gather," it said, "that, in your judgment, the mere fact of my extraction, if known, would be sufficient to exclude me from any social circle?"

I replied that that was distinctly my impression. "Then," it stipulated, "if I leave you now, will you give me your word of honour as a young English gentleman never to reveal to any living soul what I really am?"

What it really was must be so obvious to the most careless observer that I felt I could safely promise, and besides, I was in such a hurry to get it out of the way before Louisa returned from church. Then it asked if there were not charitable persons called "clergy" who were in the habit of relieving deserving cases, and, with a sudden inspiration, I gave it Casbird's name and address, on condition that it did not mention who had sent it to him.

And at last, after having the unblushing impudence to inquire affectionately after Togo, it started. As I watched it slink across the road and round the corner in the direction of the curate's lodgings, I could not resist a grim chuckle. For I knew Tony Casbird not only as a fellow of strong common sense, but as a fair all-round cricketer and a first-rate half-back, and if this little beast was getting uppish, he could be safely trusted to put it in its proper place.

And anyhow, the job was more in his line than mine.

It must have been the same evening that Casbird came in. In fact I know it was, because he said he couldn't stay long, as he was going on to "Ingleholme" to tell Miss Dudlow how pleased his vicar had been with the charming effect of the Christmas decorations, which she had taken a prominent part in arranging.

Casbird was a devoted admirer of Violet's—but I was not afraid of *him*, for I didn't think he stood a sporting chance. Just as he

rose to go, he mentioned that on returning from service that morning he had found a most interesting visitor waiting to see him. I thought I could guess who it was, but I wasn't going to give myself away, so I merely said, "Oh, really?" or something of that sort.

"Yes," said Casbird, "I have seldom known a sadder, stranger case. He has come through so much, and with such splendid pluck and endurance."

Naturally Louisa wanted to know more about him. What was he like? Casbird said really he scarcely knew how to describe him. Handsome? Well, no, he should hardly call him *that*—in fact, at first sight, his appearance was somewhat against him. But such a bright, cheery little chap! So simple and fresh. "I assure you," the curate con-

"Well," said the curate, "I call him 'Ferdie' at present. It was his own wish, and he hasn't told me his other name yet. I am putting him up until I can find a suitable opening for him. He's a delightful companion, so touchingly grateful for the least kindness, so full of little delicate attentions! Why, when I came in to tea this afternoon, I found the little fellow had actually put my slippers inside the fender to warm, and was toasting a crumpet for me by the fire!"

I listened aghast. I knew Casbird rather well in for being broad-minded and tolerant and that—but I'd really no idea he would carry it so far as to chum up with a Man-



"THE PERFORMER WAS HOLDING HIS AUDIENCE ENTRANCED WITH DELIGHT AND AMAZEMENT."

drake! Well, it was his own affair. The thing was evidently an accomplished liar, and it would not surprise me in the least if when he got back he found that it had gone off with his spoons.

After Casbird had left, Louisa expressed a great curiosity to meet this new *protégé* of his, and was slightly annoyed

cluded, "that somehow he makes me feel quite worldly by comparison!"

I thought I *must* have been wrong—he couldn't possibly be referring to the Man-drake! "What do you call it—I mean *him*?" I asked.

with me for showing so little interest in the subject. I began to regret that promise of mine.

The Dudlows were having a children's party on the evening of Boxing Day, and I

had been looking forward to it eagerly. For one thing, because I always do enjoy children's parties, and in Cricklebury Park there are some particularly nice kiddies. For another, because I had made up my mind that, if I had an opportunity, I would speak out to Violet before the evening was over. I wouldn't let myself feel too sure beforehand, because that is unlucky—but all the same, I had a kind of feeling that it would be all right.

And Dudlow was not likely to refuse his consent to an engagement, for I knew his wife would put in a word for me. Mrs. Dudlow had approved of me from the first, when she saw what friends I had made with the younger children, Peggy and little Joan. Children, she always maintained, were "such infallible judges of character."

They had made me promise to come early, because, as Mrs. Dudlow was kind enough to say, they depended on me to "set the ball rolling."

I got to "Ingleholme" as early as I could, but the moment Louisa and I had passed the "cathedral glass" portico, I was aware from the shouts of children's laughter that came from the drawing-room that the ball had begun to roll already without my assistance. And I must confess that it was rather a blow, on entering, to find that, instead of the welcome I had expected, my appearance passed almost unnoticed. But they were all much too absorbed in something that was going on in the inner room—even Violet's greeting was a little casual. "Such a wonderful conjurer," she whispered; "if you go nearer the arch, you will see him much better."

When I did, I must leave you to imagine my feelings on discovering that the performer who was holding his audience entranced with delight and amazement was nothing else than that miserable little beast of a Mandrake!

It had gone on growing, and was now the height of a middle-sized pygmy—but it was just as hideous as ever, and in spite of its being in correct evening clothes, I knew it at once. And what is more, I could see it knew *me*, and was trying to catch my eye and claim my admiration.

It was conjuring—or I should rather say, pretending to conjure—for while it kept on jabbering away with the utmost assurance, it never succeeded in bringing off a single trick. Now, I don't call myself a conjurer (though I can do a few simple things with eggs and half-crowns and so forth)—but I should have been sorry to make such an exhibition of myself as that incompetent little rotter was doing.

The odd thing was that nobody but myself

seemed in the least to realize how poor the performance was; the Mandrake had got round them all, grown-ups and children alike, and deluded them into accepting its bungling efforts as a quite marvellous display of dexterity. Why, even when, after borrowing Dudlow's gold watch, it coolly handed it back smashed to fragments, he merely swept all the loose wheels and springs into his waistcoat pocket, and said that it was "Capital—uncommonly clever." And not out of politeness, mind you; I could see he really thought so!

After the conjuring there were games, which were entirely organized by the Mandrake. Nobody consulted *me*; if I hadn't joined in by way of asserting myself, I should have been completely out of it. I tried to behave as if I didn't know the Mandrake was in the room; but this was not easy, as the little brute made a point of barging into me and rumpling my hair and pommelling me all over, as if to induce me to take some notice of it.

People only remarked on its high spirits, but I couldn't help saying that there was a considerable difference between high spirits and downright horseplay; and really, to hear little Joy Hammond (a special pal of mine) coming up with flushed face and sparkling eyes when I was gasping on the carpet, trying to recover my wind and one or two of my enamel and mother-of-pearl waistcoat buttons, and asking me, "*Isn't* Ferdie a lovely toy-fellow?" was enough to put anyone a little out of temper!

The children all called it "Ferdie." Bobbie Clint, another intimate friend of mine, informed me proudly that it had "partic-kerily asked them to." It was simply maddening to see them all hanging about it, and making such a ridiculous fuss over that little horror, while Casbird looked on smiling, with all the airs of a public benefactor!

I felt it was almost too hard to bear when my beloved Violet reproved me privately for my stiffness, and added that, if there *was* one quality more than another she detested in a man, it was a sulky disposition!

I did not defend myself—my pride kept me silent; if she chose to misunderstand me, she must. But I was determined to have it out with the Mandrake privately at the very first opportunity—and I contrived to inveigle it out of the room on some pretext—"Dumb Crambo," I think it was.

It skipped into the hall with me readily enough; I fancy it flattered itself that I was coming round at last. But I very soon un-

deceived it: I told it that it knew as well as I did it had no business there, and I insisted on its leaving the house instantly, offering, if it did so, to save its face by explaining that it had been suddenly called away.

I can see it now as it sat perched on an oak chest, looking up at me with an assumption of injured innocence. It protested that it didn't want to go yet—why *should* it, when it was having the time of its life, and everybody, except me, was being so kind to it? It had the impertinence to add that it was sorry to see a character so fine in many respects as mine disfigured by so mean a passion as jealousy—which made me furious.

I replied that I was hardly likely to be jealous under the circumstances, and it could leave my character alone. All I had to say was that, if the Mandrake remained, I should be compelled to speak out.

"Oh no!" it said, "you will not do that, because, if you remember, you gave me your word of honour that you would never betray the secret of my birth!"

"When I gave that," I retorted, "I never imagined you would have the audacity to push yourself in here—and at a children's party too!"

It said it had always been its dream to be invited to a real children's party, and now it had come true and I must have seen how popular it was making itself. It was sure I would not be so cruel as to expose it—I was too honourable a gentleman to break my word.

It had found my weak point there and knew it—but I stood firm. "I don't consider myself bound by that any longer," I said. "It's my duty to say what I know—and, if you leave me no other alternative, I mean to do it."

"Listen to me," it said, with a soft but deadly earnestness, and I thought I could read in its little eyes, as they glittered in the rays of the hall lantern, a certain veiled and sinister menace. "I warn you, for your own sake, because I should like to spare you if possible. If you insist on denouncing me, you little know the consequences you will bring upon yourself! *You* will be the chief sufferer from your rashness."

I can't deny that this warning had some effect on me; so much so, in fact, that I am

afraid I climbed down to some extent. I said that I was as anxious as itself to avoid a scandal, and that I should take no steps so long as it behaved itself. And then we went in and played "Dumb Crambo," or whatever it was, and I got mauled about by the Mandrake more severely than ever!

But I was beginning to have enough of it, and I took the curate aside and hinted that his friend struck me as a bit of a bounder, and that as he was already getting above himself, it would be as well to get him away before supper. Casbird was indignant; he said that "Ferdie" was the life and soul of the party, and he couldn't understand my attitude, especially when the dear little fellow had taken such a decided fancy to me! He had always thought, he said, that I was above these petty prejudices. So I didn't press it, and soon afterwards we went in to supper.

It made me feel positively ill to see all those nice kiddies almost fighting



"IF YOU INSIST ON DENOUNCING ME, YOU LITTLE KNOW THE CONSEQUENCES YOU WILL BRING UPON YOURSELF!"

for the privilege of sitting next that little fraud, and then to watch it making an absolute hog of itself with sausage-rolls and lemon sponge! And the way they pulled crackers with it, too, and pressed the rings out of them on it as keepsakes, till its little claws were loaded with cheap jewellery. I sat between Violet and Peggy—but neither of them offered to pull a cracker with *me*!

Still, I bore it all without murmuring until towards the end, when Dudlow suddenly got up and asked us to charge our glasses and drink to the health of the new friend who had contributed so enormously to the general enjoyment that evening.

I knew what was coming, and so did the Mandrake, though it cast down its eyes with a self-conscious smirk, as if it could not think to whom its host was referring!

And then, all at once, I felt I could not stand any more. It was my duty to speak. Whatever it might cost me, I *must* prevent poor Dudlow—whom I liked and respected for his own sake as well as because he was Violet's father—from making such an irreparable mistake as proposing the health of a Mandrake at his own table!

So I rose, and implored him to sit down and leave the rest of his speech unspoken; I said I had reasons which I would explain privately later on.

He replied rather heatedly that he would have no hole-and-corner business under *his* roof; if I had anything to say, I had better say it then and there, or sit down and hold my tongue.

The Mandrake sat perfectly calm, with its beady eyes fixed warningly on me, but I saw its complexion slowly change from coal-black to an awful grey-green shade that made the blue and pink fool's cap it was wearing seem even more hideously incongruous.

But I had gone too far to stop now; I was no longer afraid of its vengeance. It might blast me to death where I stood—I didn't care. It would only reveal its true character—and then, perhaps, Violet would be sorry for having misjudged me so!

"If that—that *thing* over there," I said, pointing to it, "had not cast some cursed spell over you all, so far from drinking its unwholesome health, you would shrink from it in horror!"

There was a general outcry, amidst which Casbird sprang to his feet. "Let us have no more of these dastardly insinuations!" he shouted. "Tell us, if you can, what you accuse our Ferdie of having done!"

"It's not what it's *done*," I said, "it's what

it *is*! Are you blind, that you cannot see that it's nothing more or less than a Mandrake?" I was going on to explain how I had bought it by mistake in a bag of mixed anemone roots, when Dudlow brought me up with a round turn that almost took my breath away.

"And if he *is* a Mandrake, sir," he said, "what *of* it?"

"What *of* it?" I could only gasp feebly. "I should have thought myself that that was quite enough to make him impossible—at a party like this!"

"And who are *you*," thundered the curate, "that you presume to sit in judgment on a fellow-creature? Let me tell you that you might have some reason for this superciliousness if you were half as good a man as poor dear little Ferdie here is a Mandrake!" He patted it affectionately on the shoulder as he spoke, and I saw Violet's lovely eyes first shine on him in admiration of his chivalry, and then blaze on me with scorn and contempt.

Indeed, they all seemed to consider my conduct snobbish in the extreme, and the Mandrake was the object of universal sympathy as it endeavoured to squeeze out a crocodile tear or two.

"All *right*!" I said. "Pitch into me if you like! But you will see presently. It threatened me only half an hour ago with the most awful consequences if I dared to expose it. Now let it do its worst!"

But little did I foresee the fiendish revenge it was preparing. It got up on its chair and began to make a speech. *Such* a speech—every sentence of it reeking with the cheapest sentiment, the most maudlin claptrap! But clever—diabolically clever, even I could not help acknowledging *that*.

It began by saying how hurt it felt that I could imagine it would ever harm a hair of my head. Never, no, not even when I had driven it from my door last Christmas Eve, out into the bitter night and the falling snow (which was sheer melodrama, for Christmas Eve had been rather warmer and muggier than usual!), not even then had it had any sentiments towards me but the humblest devotion and affection! It did not blame me for resenting its intrusion among them that evening. Perhaps I could not be expected to understand what a temptation it had been to a lonely wanderer like itself to forget the inferiority of its position, and share for a few too fleeting hours in the innocent revelry of happy children, at a season, too, when it had fondly hoped that charity and

goodwill might be shown to all alike. But I had made it realize its mistake—and now it could only implore our pardon and assure us that it would trouble us but a very little while longer.

At this its voice quavered, and it broke down, most artistically. There was not a dry eye — except mine—round the supper-table. As for Dudlow, he was blubbering quite openly, while Peggy, Joan, Joy Hammond, and all the other children entreated "darling Ferdie" not to leave

ring it had on (off a cracker, if you please!), and wear it always as a remembrance, and in token that it forgave me, fully and freely!

And then, to my unspeakable horror, it collapsed in a heap on its chair, and shrivelled slowly away inside its dress-clothes until it was once more the wizened object it had been when I first saw it!

You may have seen those "dying



H.M. ROGERS

"IT COLLAPSED IN A HEAP ON ITS CHAIR."

them, and I heard myself described by Bobbie Clint as a "beastly beast," and Tommy Dickson passionately declared that I was a sneak!

All this was unpleasant enough—but nothing to what followed. That devilish little imp was keeping an even higher card up its sleeve for the climax. After mastering its emotion, it thanked all its dear young playmates for still desiring to keep it with them, but said that, alas, it was not to be! The sudden shock of learning that I, whose affection it had striven so hard to win, regarded it with such bitter antipathy had been too much for its high-strung, sensitive nature—it felt that its end was very near. One last request it had to make of me, and that was that I would accept the beautiful emerald

roosters" they sell in the streets — well, it went down exactly like one of those. And up to the time its head fell over in a final droop, its evil little eyes were fixed on me with vindictive triumph.

It had scored off me thoroughly, and was jolly well aware of it.

I knew perfectly well that the little wretch wasn't really dead — but though I assured them all it was merely shamming, they only turned away in horror at what they called my "cold-blooded brutality."

It was like some horrible nightmare. I was in the right and they were all wrong—but I couldn't get anybody to see it. I would rather not dwell on the scene that followed: the wailing of those poor deluded little kiddies, Louisa's hysterical refusal to consider me any longer a brother of hers, Casbird's manly sorrow over the departed Ferdie, and Violet's gentle, loving efforts to console him. I had no time to observe more, for just then Dudlow ordered me out of the house and forbade me ever again to cross his threshold. . . .

I must have got back to "Ullswater" somehow, but I have no recollection of doing so. Everything was a blank until I found myself in our drawing-room, lying groaning in an arm-chair, with my head pressed against its side.

And then, as the incidents of that disastrous party came back to me, one by one, I shivered in an agony of shame. I really do not think I have ever felt so utterly miserable in all my life!

I had done for myself, hopelessly, irremediably. I had lost Violet for ever. Louisa would tell me, the moment she came home, that we must arrange to live apart. Casbird would cut me dead in future. Even the little kiddies would refuse to be friends with me any longer! . . . And why had all this happened? Because I had not had the sense to hold my tongue! What earthly business was it of mine if the Dudlows chose to invite a Mandrake to "Ingleholme"? Why need I have been so down on the poor little brute? At Christmas-time, too, when any ordinarily decent fellow would have taken a more Dickensy view of things! I couldn't understand my having behaved so outrageously—it did not seem like *me*. . . .

And yet, hang it all! I had only done the right thing. True, I might have been more tactful over it. I could see now, when it was too late, that to go and make a scene at supper like that was scarcely good form. I might have thought more of the children's feelings.

Here a dreadful doubt took hold of me. Suppose I had been mistaken all along in the Mandrake's character? I knew very little about the creatures after all—only what I had read in Sir Thomas Browne, and even *he* seemed to hold that the stories to their discredit were either exaggerations or vulgar or common errors.

And, repulsive as I had found "Ferdie," I could not remember anything in his conduct that would seem very reprehensible,

even in a choir-boy. And all his sentiments had been exemplary. Had I been guilty of a "vulgar error"? Had I really, as Casbird put it, "broken a loving little heart by my stupid cruelty"? Was I, as he had called me, a "moral murderer"? They might hold an inquest on the thing. I should be called on to give my evidence—the jury would add a rider to their verdict censuring me for my conduct, and the coroner would endorse their opinion with some severe remarks! It would get into all the papers; the fellows at the bank would send me to Coventry; I should be lucky if I did not get the sack! . . .

But stop—would they really make such a fuss as all that about a mere Mandrake? If they only made a few inquiries, when they calmed down, surely they would find out *something* shady about it. How did it get hold of those evening clothes, for instance, when all the shops were shut? It must have made a burglarious entry somewhere—I remembered how coolly it had appropriated the Golliwogg's . . . and at this point I shuddered and started, as, once again, that long shrill scream rang out into the night! Great heavens! Had Togo pulled up *another* of them? I felt I could *not* go through it all a second time. But this time the sound really was much more like a railway engine. What if, after all—I could settle it in a moment; I had only to turn my head—and, if I saw the Golliwogg lying there on the table with nothing on, I should *know*!

For some seconds I could not summon up courage enough to look.

And then, slowly, in deadly terror of finding my worst fears confirmed, I turned round. . . .

What my feelings were on discovering that the Golliwogg was fully clothed I can't express—I could have sobbed with relief and joy on its blue shoulder.

I glanced at the old brown book which lay face downwards on the floor. It was still open at Chapter VI., "Of sundry tenents concerning vegetables or plants, which examined, prove either false or dubious." And then it occurred to me that, if I *must* dream any more about Mandrakes, it would on the whole be more comfortable to do so in bed.

The Dudlows' children's party was a very cheery affair, although there was no Mandrake to keep things going. And I *did* get an opportunity of speaking to Violet, and it *was* all right. At least, it will be, as soon as I get my next rise.