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MANDRAKE

By ADAM HULL SHIRK

"FALLON, you've got to help me!" Dr. George Burton laid one hand, which trembled, upon the arm of his friend, the eminent psychologist, Professor Fallon, and fixed his tired eyes upon the latter's calm face.

"Of course I'll help you, George," said the scientist, reassuringly, "but first you must tell me just what is the matter."

Dr. Burton sat back in his chair and nodded slowly:

"Yes," he said, "I will. But—I don't understand it all myself."

"Never mind—go ahead—"

"You remember my writing you last fall that I hoped to be married before so very long? Well, that hope may never be realized. This is the story: A couple of years ago, Power Marbury and his wife and two daughters came to Cranways. Six months later, Mrs. Marbury died. You may recall the case. The husband was convicted. It was murder, and though the evidence was purely circumstantial, there was never a doubt of the outcome. Power Marbury was sentenced to pay the extreme penalty and did so, unconfessed."

The physician rose and took a turn across the room before reseating himself. The psychologist said nothing. Presently the younger man continued:

"Can you imagine the effect on those two girls—Alice, not yet sixteen and Marjorie just two years her senior? Is it any wonder that they were stricken, almost driven insane? It was fortunate they had one friend in this narrow, hell-fearing community. Old Squire Broadman had been their father's executor, to care for the considerable property left to the two girls, but remaining in his hands until they should marry when it reverted to them automatically. He it was who defied the pious citizens and took them in, to share his bachelor home, like daughters of his own. Had it not been for him, Fallon, God knows what would have become of those two helpless orphans."

"What followed?"

"Fate seemed to be relentless," pursued the doctor, "and after a while Alice fell ill. I was called in. But in

spite of all I could do, she faded, just as a flower transplanted to alien soil will wither and die. I exerted all my slight skill. The malady was apparently impervious to drugs. And in the end she—died. . . . That left Marjorie—alone.

"In the days when I had attended her sister, I learned to love her. I have never met a girl who was blessed with a sweeter disposition and how she bore up under it all, no one will ever understand. I had not spoken to her, of course, but some day I knew that I should do so, and that she would receive my proposal favorably. I had good cause to believe. . . . This brings me up to recent events—events that have resulted in my sending for you, Fallon, my old friend!"

"You are welcome to my help—but you have not yet told me what the present difficulty is."

The physician sighed:

"I'm coming to that," he muttered. "It was about three weeks ago that I learned Marjorie had taken to visiting the cemetery where her mother and father and sister were buried. It lies just outside the village. I remonstrated with her, because I saw it was a means of keeping the tragedies ever before her mind. But it was of no avail. Then, about ten days ago, she was stricken—"

"Stricken?" The scientist looked sharply at his friend. "What happened?"

"She was found on her doorstep in a dead faint, a look of absolute horror frozen on her face. I was called, and it took me several hours to revive her. When she came to, she confessed to having been frightened, but that was all she could or would tell. Then I learned she had been to see a charlatan who has lately come to town and established himself in offices here—Valdemar is his name, and he claims to be a hypnotist, psychometrist, or something of the kind."

"I know the breed," nodded Fallon. "Go on. She saw him?"

"Yes. I deduced that this might be the cause of her collapse and visited him myself. He admitted her consulting him, that she seemed obsessed regarding her father's possible innocence and had

asked his advice. He said he had been unable to help her. Indeed, he seemed so fair spoken that I could find no cause to blame him. But Marjorie grew worse. She has become morose and seems to have lost confidence not only in me, but even in her guardian, who is as deeply anxious as I am.

"Fallon, she is secretly worried or frightened, and it is driving her slowly mad. That's why I've sent for you. Can you help me—by helping her?"

The savant sat for a moment immersed in thought. Finally he nodded:

"I feel certain I can," he declared, "and I suggest that we call on the young lady at once. Can it be arranged?"

"Certainly—I was about to suggest it—"

"Introduce me as a brother physician visiting you—nothing more and—"

Fallon's speech was interrupted by a knock at the office door, and in a moment the attendant announced that Peleg White wanted to see the doctor urgently.

Burton turned to his friend apologetically: "He's a sort of half-wit I've befriended—it won't take a moment."

"Bring him in," suggested Fallon.

The old creature came haltingly into the room, a malformed, hesitating parody of mankind. His story was quickly told, however, and, strangely enough, bore upon their present problem:

"It's about Miss Marjorie, Doctor," he said. "I know she's a friend of yours. Well, last night I slept out in the old hollow tree near the buryin' ground, and I seen her come stealin' in like a ghost. I wasn't afeared, though, an' I followed to where her father was buried. She kneeled right down by his grave, and I thought she was prayin'—"

"What was she doing—?"

"She was pullin' something up outen the ground—looked like a weed or somethin'. And just as it came 'way, they was the most awful onearthly shriek I ever heard in all my born days. Miss Marjorie she yelled out, too, and started to runnin' away. I run, myself. And then I knew you'd oughter know."

"Thank you, Peleg," said the doctor with a look of dismay on his face as he glanced at Fallon. "Here's a dollar for you. Don't say anything about this to a soul."

Mouthing his thanks, the half-wit hastened away. Burton turned to his friend.

"What does it mean?" he asked.

"It means," said the psychologist, "that the sooner we see Miss Marjorie, the better. Come along."

THEY found the girl alone, pale, indicating by her manner lack of sleep and a condition of extreme nervousness.

To their questions as to her feelings, she answered listlessly. The psychologist said little, but observed her every move and gesture.

Back at Burton's office, the latter asked:

"Have you formed any conclusion?"

The other shook his head negatively.

"Not as yet. But I can assure you of one thing. There is a cause for her malady that is not altogether pathological. It goes deeper, my boy—we've got to locate it."

On the following day, while the two men were seated again in the doctor's consulting room, Peleg White put in his appearance in a state of extreme agitation. Admitted to the office, he plumped down on the table a grotesque object that resembled nothing the physician could remember having seen in his experience.

"I just come from Miss Marjorie," panted the half-wit. "She wanted I should sell this durn thing for forty cents or less. Said I mustn't take as much even as half a dollar cause she'd paid that for it. Told me not to tell nobody she give it to me, but I reckon I kin tell you. Anyway, who'd give me even a penny for the thing."

"I will," said Fallon, before his friend could speak. "Here's exactly forty cents. Take the money right back to the lady and don't tell her who bought it. Here's a quarter for yourself."

When the creature had departed, Burton turned to his friend with the pain he felt written plainly on his face.

"In God's name," he cried, "what is it?"

Fallon took up the thing and examined it with deep interest. It was a vegetable of some sort, of a sickly flesh color so far as the root was concerned; black mould still clung to it, and when viewed from a certain angle, the root portion bore a most uncanny resemblance to a human body.

"This," said the psychologist, slowly, "is a mandrake. One of the first I've ever seen!"

"Mandrake?" Burton repeated in a puzzled tone.

"Exactly. The one plant concerning which superstition is almost universal. Many books have been written about it. Even Shakespeare refers to it—I think in 'Romeo and Juliet,' where he speaks of 'Shrieks like Mandrakes torn out of the earth'."

The doctor shook his head, shudderingly.

"I can't understand—"

"This much," said the scientist, quickly, "I do understand—we must get back to Miss Marbury at once."

Dr. Burton stared at him in sudden alarm.

"You mean she is worse?"

"I don't think so—but something must be done immediately. I suppose," he added, "you trace the connection between my quotation from Shakespeare and the story of Peleg about Marjorie at the cemetery?"

"You mean the shriek—that she was pulling this thing from the earth—?"

"It seems likely. But let us be going."

They found Marjorie so greatly improved on their arrival that Dr. Burton, at least, was overjoyed. His friend, however, seemed less impressed by her greater vivacity and the improved color in her cheeks. Seeking an excuse for their return so soon after the previous visit—though the doctor himself was in the habit of calling almost every day—Fallon observed that he had wanted to look at some of the Squire's books which he had noted when they were there before.

"I'm sorry," said the girl, "the Squire is out. But you can make yourself at home there, anyway—in the library."

Fallon smiled at her as he expressed his thanks.

Dr. Burton followed him to the door.

"She's better, don't you think?"

"She's seen Peleg," murmured Fallon enigmatically, and left them together.

In the library, quite an extensive one, he browsed among the books, looked at several, rubbed some of the upper edges gingerly with his forefinger and read a few lines from certain volumes. He also examined the contents of a Japanese card tray on a table, slipped one card into his pocket, and made a note on a slip of paper.

When he returned, Marjorie was smiling happily, but, as he gazed into her face, he noted the sudden alteration in her expression. She was staring with

increasing horror, past him at the doorway. Dr. Burton noticed the change at the same instant, and rose with a question on his lips. But Professor Fallon, seizing a stick from the corner of the room, alashed viciously at a small pinkish object that was crawling along the floor and through the draperies at the entrance.

The scientist followed, leaving Burton to care for the girl, who had sunk back on the couch, one hand at her heart:

"He lied to me," she whispered, "he lied—"

Then she fainted. As the physician set to work to revive her, sounds of a struggle from the hallway came to his ears and his friend's voice calling his name. He laid the girl gently on the couch and tugged madly at the bell rope. As he tore the curtains aside and rushed out a servant came screaming down the corridor—

"They're killing one another," she cried.

"Go to Miss Marbury," he ordered, and hastened to where Fallon was struggling in the grasp of someone who, in the dim light he could not at first recognize: then he caught a glimpse of the white hair and beard of Squire Broadman, just as the scientist cried out:

"Hurry, for God's sake! Can't you see he's crazy?"

Together they overpowered the maniac and bound him with a cord from the portieres.

"He was in a niche of the wall," explained the psychologist, as he regained his breath. "He jumped on me as I came out."

"What does it mean?" asked Burton.

"First 'phone for an ambulance to take him away. Then get an order for the arrest of that fellow Valdemar. After that I'll explain. How is Miss Marbury?"

"Fainted—but she will be all right. Wait for me—I'll use the 'phone downstairs."

A few moments later he returned.

"That's attended to. The ambulance is coming, and they'll get Valdemar—it seems they've got enough to hold him on, anyway—obtaining money under false pretenses or something."

Marjorie had fallen into a deep sleep under the ministrations of the psychologist, and Burton drew his friend into the library.

"For heaven's sake," he begged, "tell me what it means."

The other removed from his pocket another of those ill-favored vegetables and laid it on the table: "There," he said, "is the root of the whole matter."

You see tied about it a bit of silk thread? I broke it with my cane. The other end was in the hands of the madman. Briefly it is part of a diabolical plot to drive Miss Marbury insane or to the grave. It's God's justice that the one responsible suffered the fate he intended to inflict on another."

"Squire Broadman?"

"Of course. He would have lost control of the estate when Marjorie married, would he not?"

"Yes."

"That's it. Probably he has speculated with the money he held in trust. Now as to the Mandrake—and Valdemar: The cemetery story and the business of selling the plant were my first rays of light. In the library here I found, among other books, Thomas Newton's 'Herball to the Bible.' It had been much used—lately. No dust on it, such as the other books showed. This passage was marked:

"It is supposed to be a creature having life engendered under the earth of the seed of some dead person put to death for murder."

"In a more recent work, Skinner's 'Myths and Legends of Flowers' I discovered a dog-eared page on which I read this: '*The devil has a special watch on these objects and unless one succeeded in selling one for less than he gave for it, it would stay with him till his death.*' How does that strike you?"

"But now we come to Valdemar. Here is a card I found in the Squire's card

tray there. It's the charlatan's, you see. On the reverse is a memo in the Squire's writing—'*See V. tomorrow and get more mandrakes.*' You see, he was a benevolent old fiend. Of course, it was he who shrieked in the cemetery as she tore up the mandrake. It's hellish—that's all. Now let's see Valdemar."

THEY found the eminent psychometrist in the city jail, much perturbed and decidedly crestfallen. He told them, under methods not far removed from the third degree, his part in the transaction: Broadman had been working on the girl's mind, telling her she ought to vindicate her father's memory if she could, and sent her to Valdemar, whom he had previously hired to help in the nefarious scheme. He told her to go home and if anything happened to tell him.

As she reached the door, a white figure rose in the dark hallway—as prearranged—and commanded her in sepulchral tones neither to rest nor sleep till her father's memory had been cleared. She swooned.

Then she told the Squire, but he cautioned her not to speak to the doctor about it and again to consult Valdemar. Broadman had read the mandrake stuff, and the charlatan had arranged to secure some of the plants—goodness knows where—and suggested to Marjorie that she plant one on the grave of her father. Later, if she pulled it up, and the thing shrieked, she would know her parent had

been justly punished. It had merely to be planted one day and torn up the next, they told her, to attain the desired results.

She had paid fifty cents for the thing, it seems, and naturally threw it from her when she heard the awful cry. Returning home, she found what she believed to be the same mandrake somewhere about her room, for as Skinner's book had further said: "*Throw it into the fire, into the river. . . . so soon as you reached home, there would be the mandrake, creeping over the floor, smirking human fashion from a shelf or ensconced in your bed!*"

She told Valdemar, and he assured her that if she sold the thing for less than she had paid for it, the curse would be removed. She tried this, but again one of the dread plants crept across the floor. Then the end had come swiftly. Doubtless, Valdemar admitted, the squire was himself half demented for years. Burton, putting two and two together, believed that in some subtle way Broadman had brought about the death of Alice, as he had hoped to encompass that of Marjorie, or at least to drive her insane, so that she might not marry and thus automatically expose his own guilt in the matter of the money.

"Which proves," remarked Fallon, as he bade his friend good-bye at the station the following day, "that it pays to read abstruse matter sometimes. I knew the legend of the mandrake long before I refreshed my memory of the thing in Squire Broadman's library!"