

THE HAND OF THE UNKNOWN

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CHAPTER I. THE TELEGRAM.

THE youth was strong with a thoroughbred quality of muscle, but the man who had just struck him apparently feared no return blow.

"There," he cried, stepping back from the busy street into the protecting shadow of a large building, "now perhaps you'll know I'm through with you; ungrateful rascal!"

The blood trickled from a cut on the boy's head, a cut which extended almost to the light wavy hair, but the raising of his hand was instinctive rather than the result of pain.

"So you're through with me?" he repeated. "I guess it's just as well for us both."

"Sure, and now you get out, Jim—you with your schooling and gentle ways—thinking you can reform your father—get out, I say." The man's anger showed no signs of lessening, but the other stepped a little closer to him in the darkness.

"Get it right—just I'm—"

Another blow aimed at the youth's head was skillfully dodged, and with a quick glance at the man, Jim darted across the street and into the first shelter from the rain which opened to him. The burly man muttered an imprecation, turned on his heel and disappeared, severed from the only living thing that cared whether he went, win or lose.

Meanwhile Jim had seated himself in the great railroad station through the entrance to which his heedless flight had taken him, and oblivious to his surroundings, summed up the situation.

His age was about 22, his face and body combining a strange mixture of naturally gentle lines almost obscured by the furtive look constant associations with the life of a great city always bring to the face. But perhaps the best characterization of his appearance and the impression he gave to passers-by came from a young woman sitting almost opposite him.

"Agnes," she whispered to an elderly companion, "look at that boy with the cut in his head. I'm sorry for him. He's—he is troubled—and isn't he interesting."

"But he's so ragged, Grace," responded her companion.

Unconscious of the kind comments so near him, Jim sat silent, his mind just beginning to understand that freedom had come from the foul restraint he had long wished to shake off.

And I have wanted to get away for so long," he told himself. "Now that it has come I scarcely know what to do."

Slowly he took from his pocket an old wallet and absently counted the money it contained. Ten dollars!

At last, holding the soiled bills in his hand, Jim approached the ticket and baggage counter, after waiting his turn, addressed the man behind the brass bars.

"I've got nine dollars," he said, thinking that he would retain one of the bills for an emergency, "and I want to go as far away from this city as that will take me. Give me a ticket—anywhere."

"Where?" replied the agent, looking wonderingly at the youth. "That's a strange remark. Let's see—country or city?"

"Oh, the country; as country as possible."

"All right, here's a ticket to Chanton, nearly 400 miles from here, and it's country, all right. Eighty dollars and eighty-six cents. Wish you luck. Train leaves at 9:20."

Jim took the ticket and change and again sought his seat, noticing that it was already nearly time for his train to start. His only thought was to get away from this place so full of unpleasant memories.

"No more Boverly for me," he muttered. "To the country it is—and may the change be complete."

The women who had taken such an interest in the lad's looks were in earnest conversation now, but occasionally the younger of the two would turn her great eyes in his direction, safe in the knowledge that he had not noticed her.

Jim had just glanced at the big clock when he became conscious of the two so near him, and it was at this moment that a young man, evidently a stranger, approached the women. Jim could not hear the words he spoke, but he was momentarily aroused from his dejection by the episode that followed them.

"Mrs. Gordon," began the newcomer deferentially, "this telegram came for you just after you had left. I thought I had best bring it here."

"Thank you, John," replied the young woman. "That will do. I will attend to the answer if there is one."

At that moment the megaphone man called the name of the train Jim was to board, and he arose from his seat. Some strange instinct, however, impelled him to wait a moment.

Thus he watched the young woman rise and move toward the door, and saw her lips move as she read the words at first to herself, then aloud to the elderly woman by her side. And he also saw the filmy yellow thing fall to the floor, and the abject terror expressed in the great eyes of the girl who had just held it.

Slowly, as though unconscious, she turned to her companion, and stood in the silence of unbelief. Then, "Come, aunt," he heard her say distinctly, as the two moved away from him, through the door and out where the trains waited.

Still Jim stood immovable, overcome by the vision of a stricken heart, which had come to him for the first time in his sensitive life.

Another glance at the clock recalled the fact that he, too, must start on his journey, and with a last look about him he moved toward the gates. That last look, however, had shown him a black article lying on the floor of the station near the spot lately occupied by the possessor of the glorious eyes. He hastened to secure the fine leather handbag, beside which the brilliant yellow of the telegram attracted his attention. She had dropped it both after her perusal of the message.

Hastily picking up the articles, Jim started to make the rounds, but his hurried inquiries after the two women brought no results. The call of "All aboard" for the nine-twenty" sounded in his ears before he gave up, but at last he found himself on the train, bag and telegram still in his possession, and the first puffs of his slow-moving engine telling him that his new life had begun.

"Why didn't I leave the things at

the station?" he asked himself, but the fact that they were still in his hands brought a sense of companionship which was not unpleasant.

After a long, absent-minded scrutiny of the bag, and some slight temptation to read the words which had made such an impression on the girl, he opened the former, placed in it the yellow slip and closed it again—he kept the fellow in view. He was soon rewarded for his surveillance. As the train came to a stop before a small country station, he saw the foreigner pick up his roll of blankets, cast one disgusted look back over his shoulder, and leave the car. Jim's last sight of him was through the car window, as his ragged figure slouched around the corner of the station.

The next time the boy saw this disgusting figure there was no slouch in his attitude, but the keenest satisfaction. Undisturbed by further incident, the young man passed the next three hours alternately thinking of the bag and of his future life. At last the brakeman announced "Chanton," and Jim alighted from the car, eager to begin his new life.

With characteristic energy he at once inquired the way to the express office, anxious to discharge the first duty which lay ahead. It was a short walk, but when at last he stood on the business street of the town, an unpleasant spectacle presented itself.

In every direction stretched the ruins of what had lately apparently been a busy village. Temporary wooden structures had been erected in the most austere fashion, and after overcoming his wonder at the sight of a whole district burned almost to the ground, Jim succeeded in finding the express office.

Here he wrapped the bag in strong paper, addressed and presented it to the clerk, to be forwarded to the unknown girl of the glorious eyes.

The expressman had just come from the train which had brought Jim to town, and eyed the address as he removed his coat preparatory to doing the work of the office before delivering the lately arrived packages.

"Funny," he remarked, reading the name, "The Mrs. Gordon you're sending this to just came home this mornin'."

"What?" exclaimed the boy. "Why I came on that train, too."

"You probably want in the sleepin' car," replied the other, glancing at the young man's ill-kept attire.

"No," said Jim. "I'm here anyway. Want to send it just the same?"

"No, I'll deliver it myself if you will tell me where she lives."

After giving Jim a detailed account of the various streets which he must traverse in order to reach Mrs. Gordon's home the clerk commented upon the recent fire which had played such havoc with the town.

"Don't know how it started," he said, "but we know as how it nearly burned the place."

"Do you suppose I can find a job here?" inquired Jim, timidly.

"Sure; there'll be lots o' work buildin' up."

"With this satisfactory information Jim left the office thinking that he would at once seek out Mrs. Gordon and return her property. But the uncomfortable feeling resulting from a night spent in the train made his shabby clothing seem even more uninviting than it was, and remembering his dollar and four-cent cents, he inquired the way to the cheapest hotel in the place, determined to bathe, breakfast and try to freshen up a bit.

The only hotel which had escaped the fire proved to be at some distance, but Jim reached it at last, and for twenty-five cents obtained permission to make

use of the bathroom. The good breakfast furnished him subsequently took another quarter, but when he had finished he felt that the expenditure was worth while.

It was nearly 11 o'clock by the time he finally stood on the steps of the porch ready to start again for the home of Mrs. Gordon.

CHAPTER III. AMAZING GREETING.

JIM had scarcely left the veranda when some one approached him from the rear and laid a detaining hand on his shoulder. It was a god-looking young man, somewhat older than Jim.

"Just a moment," he said. "I will trouble you to answer a few questions." Jim was courteous enough as a rule, but he had just come from a large city where he had lived in one of the most notorious sections, and he was not accustomed to allowing such liberties as this stranger seemed to take as a matter of right. So perhaps his reply was a bit curt.

"Well, what is it?"

"Now, don't be so high and mighty, young man," and for the second time that morning Jim's garments were a source of disdain.

"I am waiting at your request," returned Jim, "and you are detaining me." "And maybe will do so for some time. Where did you get that bag?"

Jim glanced at the black object held securely under his arm, then at the man before him.

"I don't know if it's any of your business," he replied.

"Is that so? You ought to be careful to learn who you are talking to before you get so fresh. Again I ask you where did you get that bag?"

"And again I say none of your business," repeated Jim, determined that he would share with no one the affairs of the girl who had lost it.

"As I happen to know to whom it belongs I will ask you to hand it over to me," said the stranger haughtily.

"And I will take the trouble to refuse," replied Jim with an equal amount of dignity.

But the young man made a grab for the bag at that moment. A quick move, however, saved the article.

"I am now on my way to return it," explained Jim, "and there is no occasion for you to try to take it from me. That was done once and I do not care to have it repeated."

Jim could not resist the temptation to add something which would hurt and he succeeded.

"The other would-be thief was more poorly dressed than you are, however."

This remark had a peculiar effect upon the tall stranger, and that effect was instantaneous.

Back in his mind might have been the desire to play the hero and by physical force pretend that he had rescued the girl's property from a ragged vagabond. At any rate with the remark, "Likely you are on your way to return it," he made a vicious swing at Jim, and, just grazing the boy's head, again opened the cut which had been so recently a fresh wound.

The blood started, but Jim no longer felt called upon to limit his scorn to words, and so was in the act of returning the other's blow with interest, when he was seized from behind by strong arms.

"What's the matter, Mr. Black?"

"Boy trying to get away with some property of a friend of mine."

"What will I do with him, sir?"

"Oh, let him go," magnanimously, "I'll attend to him."

But Jim interrupted vehemently, "I'm doing nothing of the kind. I'm now going to return this bag to the

person who lost it, and I will give it to no one else."

"That's all right, sheriff, I'll see that he does," said Mr. Black, "and, by the way, you had better take a good look at me. I have an idea that he was going to get away with it, but now sees that it is too late. Look at his clothes. A hobnob!"

The sheriff, who now came close to Jim, answered firmly.

"That I will, Mr. Black; he does look kind of seedy."

Jim's anger had cooled now, and, realizing that he ought to try to control his temper, he made a low bow to the officer of the law and turned to go.

"Just a moment," said Black, with a confident laugh. "I am going with you to see that you do as you say you will. I guess I will take your arm."

"I guess you'll not," and Jim turned a now-innocent face upon his tormentor. "You may follow me if you care to, but I am not compelled to walk in your company."

Black also showed his anger again, and two determined men faced each other.

"See here," said the native, "you have got to act carefully when you are in this town; I—and he turned to see that the sheriff was beyond hearing distance—"I own the officials here; I'm the boss, understand? If you want to get out of here without any trouble, you had better do as I say."

But Jim's reply was just as determined, and he showed no signs of retreating from the position he had taken.

"You're not my boss," he said, "and if you don't trust me you may follow me, as I suggested; otherwise I will go alone. Good-by."

Chagrined, but thinking that he would make no further disturbance, Black looked at the youth a moment and then fell in behind him, forcing a smile to his handsome face.

It was a strange sensation for this city youth, and an unpleasant awakening from the dreams he had had of the kindness of dwellers in the country. Instead of kindness and generosity to a stranger, his first experience had brought realization of the fact that bitterness and suspicion do not exist in the cities alone, but wherever men live.

And so the two walked up the beautiful old street, the honest, straightforward youth leading, the way according to the directions which had been given him, the "boss" of the town—a man very young for such an honor—following in all confidence.

They had reached a turn where the old elm trees softened the noontime heat of the summer sun when Black called out: "Say, you, wait a moment. Fix that head of yours."

The blood had begun to flow again from the cut, and Jim was thankful that the other had called attention to it. In a moment he had made the abrasion as respectable as possible, and once more Black spoke.

"Now see here," he said, frowning, "be very careful what you say about me, for they won't believe a stranger against my word. They're the swiftest and richest people in these parts, special friends of mine; and I'm the boss—so be careful."

"Any more instructions?" replied Jim, with a little note of patronage in his voice.

"There is the place," went on Black, pointing to a large residence far back from the street, about which stood more of the tall trees which had already won Jim's heart.

Again he started forward, followed by his shadow, but now there began to come to this youth in whose life there had been nothing but sorrow, unkindness, ingratitude, and blows, the memory of a girl reading a yellow telegram, the recollection of the birth of grief

and terror in her eyes, and he instinctively lessened his stride as he turned into the gateway and started up the path.

Even the bars' command from behind him to hasten did not take from Jim the thought of that picture, and he knew that there was little he would not do to soften the grief which he knew possessed the girl of the saddened eyes.

On the porch they were standing awaiting a response to Black's ring, when the large door opened slowly and the elder woman whom Jim had seen the previous evening was before them.

Black was not backward about addressing her, nor was there any lack of confidence in his tone.

"How do you do, Mrs. Graham?" he said. "I'm glad to see you back. I recognized."

He stopped suddenly, as through an open door within the house came the figure of a slight girl dressed in

mourning. She hesitated a moment, inquiringly, then, with wonderful grace the girl of Jim's memory swept down the long hall toward the door, past the elderly woman and the tall man standing there amazed, and threw her arms about the neck of the youth from New York.

"Oh, Jim," she cried, "Jim!"

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CHAPTER II. A STRICKEN TOWN.

ONLY once during the long night was Jim awakened, and on that occasion, after giving his ticket to the conductor and having ascertained that he would arrive at Chanton about 9 o'clock the next morning, he almost immediately slept again. But his next waking brought a knowledge which drove all drowsiness from him.

In the dim light of the early morning he felt immediately for the black bag which had been tucked away in a corner of his seat when he had lost consciousness. It was not there!

Alert in a moment, he sat straight and began a thorough search of the floor in the immediate neighborhood, but with no results. The bag was gone, and there was no question that it had been stolen from him.

Quick to act, Jim at once began a careful examination of the other passengers in the car, and seeing that there were not many of them, he determined to make a closer investigation and if necessary demand back his property.

Then another thought came to him. How could he demand back property which he could only describe by its outward appearance? Of the contents of the bag he was in complete ignorance!

With the decision to let that matter take care of itself when he had found the article, he rose and walked down the aisle, stopping beside each sleeping passenger.

A respectable-looking old man and an equally unlikely middle-aged woman he passed as not appearing to be probable thieves, and, in fact, he had almost reached the end of the car without noticing any suspicious person, when his eyes fell upon a man who certainly looked the part.

Of dirty, swarthy complexion, black disheveled hair hanging over his closed eyes, the individual under inspection lay curled up in the front seat of the car, apparently asleep. The small rings of gold in his ears at once proclaimed his nationality, and his general appearance was calculated to arouse suspicion in one who had lost any article of value.

Jim took the seat across the aisle from the filthy and, too, situated himself, keeping his eyes half open, upon the other, and thinking of the best way in which to make his accusation.

While he watched, the man opened his eyes once, looked out of the window, then again slept. In a moment his unconsciousness seemed honestly deep, and Jim felt that he would be able to make any investigation he desired.

He was still wondering what to do when there came a sudden whistle from the engine, a slowing down of the train, and then a halt. The passengers in all parts of the car were roused, and even the dark man straightened up. Jim, however, remained still and awaited developments.

One by one the younger passengers rose from their seats and moved to the door, some even stepping to the ground outside, to ascertain the cause of the delay. And, at last, the dark man also rose and was lost in a moment in the small group of people near the platform.

Quick as a flash Jim was across the aisle and rummaging among the unknown's dirty luggage. A soiled blanket in which was rolled the traveler's other baggage he moved from its position in the seat, and then could scarcely believe his good fortune, as in the corner by the window he discovered the small black bag.

With a hurried glance in the direction of the dark man, Jim seized his treasure, and was again in the seat across the aisle by the time the chief closed his eyes actually and considered the situation, but a few moments' thought convinced him that it would be best to make no disturbance for fear that the bag might eventually be taken from him, and his honest desire to return it to its real owner be frustrated.

And so, casually, he arose and returned to his former seat, noticing as he walked down the aisle that the foreigner eyed him keenly. The sight did not disturb him, however, as he knew that the thief would make no outcry if he himself remained silent.

But he did take the precaution, once he had reached his former position, to open the bag and ascertain, to the best of his inadequate knowledge, whether the contents were intact.

Yes, there was the telegram—and he now looked at the address, conscientiously refraining from reading the words written underneath—and the rest of the articles seemed undisturbed. So he was satisfied to let the matter drop, thanking his good fortune for his easy success.

Now interested in the dark man, and determined not to sleep again—as it was already morning and he feared a repetition of his loss—he kept the fellow in view. He was soon rewarded for his surveillance. As the train came to a stop before a small country station, he saw the foreigner pick up his roll of blankets, cast one disgusted look back over his shoulder, and leave the car. Jim's last sight of him was through the car window, as his ragged figure slouched around the corner of the station.

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