

# THE HAND OF THE UNKNOWN

By ROBERT RUSSELL

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### Synopsis of Chapters Already Published

James Alton, a young man brought up in the lowest quarter of New York, but of education and fine instincts, leaves the city after an altercation with his brutal father, who has just received a wound on his head. Before taking his train he finds a handbag which has been dropped by a young woman sitting near him. Mrs. Grace Gordon, who had been interested by Alton's injured and forlorn condition at the moment a telegram was handed to her. Unable to return the bag, Alton boards his train, and during the night the bag is stolen from him, but subsequently recovered. Arrived at his destination, Chanton, a country town, Alton seeks to return the bag to Mrs. Gordon, who happens to live there, but in so doing encounters Frank Black, an important personage in love with Grace. Black accompanies Jim to her home, where, to the amusement of the girl rushes to Alton and throws her arms about his neck, calling "Jim! Oh, Jim!"

### CHAPTER IV.

**THE TROUBLE.**  
FRANK BLACK the sight of Grace Gordon standing before him with her arms about the shoulders of a man whom he had never before seen, was probably the bitterest vision of his life. All the sensations of the secretly hopeful but openly unsuccessful lover came to him, and it was the conflict of the thoughts within him rather than any formed desire on his part that compelled him to stand immovable.

To Jim there came the most wonderful appreciation of life's possibilities that had ever been his, and the fact that the girl's face came to him, and his heart, had been resting there on his shoulder, in no sense lessened the intensity of the peace in his heart.

He knew that there was something far beyond his comprehension weaving its web about him, but, as plainly as though the girl was looking straight at him, he could see the face of the great, glorious eyes which made it the most beautiful in the world.

But to Mrs. Graham, perhaps, there dawned a faint understanding of the situation, for it was she who first regained her composure and broke the silence which had become so tense.

"Grace!" she cried. "Grace, dear!"  
"Oh, auntie, it's Jim! Don't you see? Jim! Jim!"

The voice was the natural accompaniment to the girl's beauty—low, sweet, but, above all, exultant. The tone of joy was the dominant note, and that note moved her throbbing heart, and she felt that she was, apparently, at a loss for words, "come here. It's not who you think."

"Is there anything I can do, Mrs. Graham?" interrupted Black. "You know how anxious I am to serve you all."

His perplexity was painfully apparent as he at first started toward the girl, then, reconsidering, returned to his former position.

"Wait"—from the elder woman.  
But here Jim determinedly interposed his word.

"I think," he said, slowly, "that I understand. Please remain quiet a moment."  
But Black could contain himself no longer, and there was a decided sneer in his voice as he addressed Alton.

"Of course, you can understand; you're in a pretty good position. I wouldn't mind your going to the office. Again Jim asserted himself, and there was no question about his sincerity.

"Whoever you are," he said, "this is none of your affair, so keep your comments to yourself."  
Then an interruption came from the one member of the group who seemed to be affected by nothing but happiness.

"Don't mind him, Jim," said the girl, looking for the first time straight into his face, and then by completing abruptly the enacting of his soul.  
"You're here again, and I don't understand what it is all about—but come dear, and tell me."

The appeal in Grace's voice and the absolute trust her words carried in her roused the older woman to action, and gently she moved to the girl's side, her hand affectionately on her shoulder.

"Come, dear," she said, "into the house, and you, Mr. Black—for we are without an adviser, you know—and you're such an old friend I know you will help us. And—turning to Jim questioningly—"I seem to know your face, but—"

At the word "face" the girl for the first time noticed the re-opened cut on the boy's forehead, and with the sight of it the tears came quickly to her eyes.

"Oh," she cried, "I remember now. You're hurt."  
Without a moment's hesitation she disappeared down the hall through the doorway whence she had come, while Mrs. Graham, Black, and Alton filed slowly into a large, old-fashioned room, adjoining the hall. But once within, the woman's energy again asserted itself, and she spoke as though echoing a thought which had come to her inspired by something unknown.

"Perhaps, Mr. Black, after all you would better wait outside nearby, there on the porch, in case—"

"My name is James Alton," interrupted Jim, "and, with an intonation which none could mistake, 'I assure you that there will be no need of Mr. Black's help, Mrs. Graham. I think perhaps I appreciate the situation better than you realize. You saw me last evening in the Grand Central Station, just as Mrs. Gordon—"

"Yes, yes, I remember now—the interesting—"

Black again took a hand.  
"The bag he came to return—"

"For the first time since that article had been reclaimed from the swarthy man in the car, the bag was no longer pressed close to Jim's body, and with a horrible fear that something had again happened to it, he darted out of the door and on to the porch, where, in the great wonder which had come with the presence of Grace Gordon, he had dropped it."

And I had to go to New York to see the doctor here. You remember, Jim, how ill Grace was, and how worried ever since her husband was killed—"

"Oh, Jim, are you all right, dear?" the girl's voice broke in.

"And," continued Mrs. Graham, "we were returning home—when the thoughtless police here—oh, it was so awful—sent Grace a telegram—"

"Oh, the telegram," and the girl sobbed horribly.

"The telegram telling Grace that you, Jim, her brother, her brother, had been burnt up in the great fire trying to save Grace's baby boy from the burning house where you and the nurse were taking care of him. You remember now, Jim, don't you?"

"Yes, yes," he faltered, "I remember now."  
"And," went on Mrs. Graham, forcing herself to continue, "the news of the disaster—the death of her baby, and yours, following almost immediately upon the terrible accident which took the life of the baby's father—it—"

"Oh, I know," cried Jim. "I knew before."  
"Oh, Jim, I thought I could not love," and the girl fell to her knees beside the couch, her arms again about his body.

"But you were not burnt, were you, dear. It's you that I'm touching, isn't it, dear? And Baby is safe somewhere, isn't he, Jim. Jim, my brother—it's all a terrible dream—oh, tell me—"

"Yes, yes, a dream, Mrs.—"

He hesitated suddenly as a warning gesture came from the aunt, and through his tears he saw the word her lips formed.

"It's a dream, Grace," he made it, speaking the name reverently. "I have him safe, Grace, where he will get well. And—the nurse is with him, and it might not—"

"But I don't understand why I can't go to him. Let me go, Jim."  
"You will go the moment you can, dearie," and Mrs. Graham looked her thanks for this stranger's wisdom.

"But I must go now, now," wailed the distracted mother. "Everything is so mixed up—I don't understand, Jim, you're so good to me always, so kind, and not like other brothers. You don't know the love—the anguish it is for me to be away from my baby—Oh, Jim, take me to him."  
Scarcely knowing what he did, Alton rose from the couch and gently lifted the girl in his arms, holding her weakly close to his own. There on the sofa, covering her placed her, and the words he spoke were as soothing as summer shade.

"Grace," he murmured, strong, confident. "You trust me, dear? Lie here now, and soon—so soon—"

perhaps a little rough from the work of the city streets, pressed hard against her dark hair—"I will take you to him. Sleep, now, Grace."  
Wonderingly the older woman watched them. The girl, quiet now, eyes closed, at rest for the first moment since the arrival of the horrible message. Her lips moved, but only Jim caught the words:

"Yes—I know you'll take me to him—"

But the other woman saw the peace which came to the girl she loved, and from that moment the man who had brought that peace held a firm place in her heart. When at last Grace's breathing was that of natural sleep, Mrs. Graham beckoned to Jim.

"Come," she whispered, and then as he left the couch and crossed the room to her side, "I don't know who you are, but you have seen—as we saw last night, that you were in trouble. From the time she received the news—and half the time she searched, searched for the bodies to see if there was any hope—from the time she got the news she has been out of her head—absolutely crazy, mad—and seeing you, when she was attracted to there in the street, just before the telegram came, she connected you with it, and now—oh think, boy, think, now she takes you for her brother, whose name is James, too—and what shall we do?"

Now that the necessity for strength had ceased, she was a woman broken

by terrible anguish, and her tears were at last loosed. And the man, so young, overcome by the thought that he was unable to keep his word to the trusting girl sleeping there in the spell of his touch, longed for light on that uncertain path.

"Isn't there some one?" he began.

"Oh, Dr. Jordan, the oldest friend she has, a friend of her dead father's and mother's, is on his way here. He will help us. And Mr. Black, I had better call him—"

"Mrs. Graham," said the boy quickly, afraid of his own intensity as he spoke, "I'm a stranger—a boy from one of the lowest parts of New York; but I've studied and worked—and there are things I have just begun to understand—things we don't usually learn down there—about life now—and what's coming after. You've got to trust me a little—I can't say much about it for I don't know—I only believe that there's something—or somebody, who sort of looks after things—and I just happened to come here. I don't know why I chose this town out of I came—and I can't say, perhaps. And perhaps that unknown thing or body knew I could help. Let me. And—don't trust that tall man waiting there outside. I—"

A knock on the front door interrupted him, and thinking intently, Mrs. Graham left the room.

In a moment she returned, stood a moment by the door, then turned to a white-haired man, who followed her to the side of the sleeping girl.

After a moment's silent scrutiny she whispered a word to the old man, who now came toward Jim with outstretched hand.

"I don't know quite all yet," said Dr. Jordan, grasping Jim's arm, "but you have done well so far, my boy."

Only the coming and going of the girl's breath could be heard, and through his tears the old man saw nothing.

Outside on the porch Jim was sitting far from the door, close to the green vines whose fragrance harmonized with the thoughts of good which filled him. Occasionally Frank Black, pacing restlessly up and down at the other end of the veranda, would pause in his walk and look in the direction of the other, with wonder and selfish analysis in his glance.

He seemed to be planning some sort of a campaign, and when he at last approached Jim, there was the evidence in his manner of the culmination of his scheme.

"I don't know your name," he said, with a hint of apology in his voice.

"Here on business, Alton?"

Before replying a sudden realization came to Jim, and though hypocrisy was no part of his character he felt that there existed a possibility that this man might make his efforts to be of help to the woman in trouble practically of no avail, and it was this thought which led him to abate somewhat his severe attitude.

"I came," he said, "to look for you." "Perhaps I can help you," quickly from the tall man.

"I can probably find something."

"With my assistance, yes; without it—perhaps."

Again there was silence between them, but Black was determined to impress the boy even at the expense of his pride.

"Say, Alton, I have an apology to make to you. I should not have been so hasty today, but when I recognized Mrs. Gordon's bag in the hands of a stranger, and remembering the trouble she was in—her baby's death, and her brother's—I couldn't restrain myself. So grant me a pardon, won't you?"

Far from being deceived, but appreciating the man's skillful acting, Jim assured him that he had completely forgotten the incident, and would bear no grudge. The next silence prepared the way for Black's real object in endeavoring to make a friend of this mysterious stranger, and his casual remark concerning the great trouble in which the woman had been plunged was but a weak attempt to cover the importance of his question.

"I haven't heard everything yet," responded Dr. Jordan. "Suppose," to Mrs. Graham, "that the young man tell Mr. Black on the porch while you join me whatever you think necessary."

Alton was quick to take the suggestion, and there was no hesitation in his step as he crossed the room.

"Of course," he said, "you both know that—I'd give anything to be able to help."

Perhaps a bit afraid that they would see the suspicion of a tear in his eye, he moved abruptly through the doorway and out to the wide veranda, cool with its clustering vines. There was a moment's silence after his departure and the shrewd eyes of the white-haired man were bent upon the opening through which he had gone.

"That boy," he said slowly, "has something to tell you."

"But you should have seen him with our poor girl, Dr. Jordan," murmured Mrs. Graham. "As gentle as a woman, and more comprehending than I."

"Tell me the whole story."

With many hesitating explanations, made more difficult of understanding by the tears which the recital inspired, Mrs. Graham spoke of the event leading up to the tragedy which had come upon them.

She reminded the man of the marriage of this girl whom he had known from her infancy—a marriage of which he had disapproved on account of her extreme youth; of her short wedded life; the birth of her son a few months since, whose coming had filled with happiness the empty days of the child wife left so alone by a thoughtless husband. Then she told of the horrible railway accident—as he had heard it many times—in which a mangled death, of the girl's sorrow and self-reproaches, followed by a seri-

ous illness which threatened to unhinge her mind and required a visit to New York for treatment by an eminent specialist.

And then she reached the part of the story which the old man had not heard—the telegram telling of her baby's death and the burning of her brother's Grace's subsequent immediate madness, none the less terrible on account of its silent intensity, and then the coming of this fair-haired young man of the city streets and her insane belief that he, the last person whom she had noticed in her conscious moments, was her brother, who could restore to her arms the babe whom her dreams told her was gone.

As she finished, shaken by inward sobs, the regular breathing of the girl on the couch brought home to them the nearness of the horror and the hopelessness of the situation.

"What—oh, what can we do?" implored the woman.

But even to this man, learned not only in the lore of his profession, but the knowledge of men and their hearts, the answer did not come.

"And the bodies have not been found?"

"The whole town has searched—they all—even the poorest love her so—and the charred remains of Jim, her brother, were unearthed from a pile of burnt timbers. He was not at home when the fire started, and hearing of it and that the baby with the nurse were there, he rushed into the flames. Oh, my old friend, what can we do? Think of the living—of my baby Grace's mind, and bring her back some sort of happiness—so young she is—and at least let her have the half destroyed coat of her child that—that they found—near the dead boy."

Only the coming and going of the girl's breath could be heard, and through his tears the old man saw nothing.

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"Meet Mrs. Gordon in New York?" Silence again.

"Or on the train. Somehow I imagine you live in New York."

"I hope to live in Chanton."

"She evidently knows you pretty well."

No answer.

"Oh, say, Alton, what's the matter with you? I tell you I'm a power in this town, and I am trying to make up for being rough this morning by getting acquainted with you now. Won't you be a bit sociable?"

Jim Alton was ignorant of the ethics of people of Mrs. Gordon's class, and to his instinct only could he turn for knowledge of the right and wrong in small matters of propriety, but the same quality which had made him understand almost immediately the condition of mind which afflicted Grace now told him that the less he discussed his acquaintance with the girl the better would he be able to help her in her sorrow. And that instinct he obeyed, knowing that it was his hope.

"I appreciate your position, Mr. Black, but—"

It was scarcely a call that interrupted him, and perhaps he did not even hear the word, but that thing within him which he had felt so often since he had been near the girl told him that her lips had spoken his name.

In a moment he was at the door, and from the great silent room where she lay came a gesture from the old doctor.

"She wants to see you, Jim. Wait there, Mr. Black," as Frank started to follow Alton into the house, "and you, Jim, come."

She was still on the couch, one hand

stretched in the direction of the door where he stood, the old longing and anxiety in her eyes. Mrs. Graham was there by the high mantel, and to her side moved the doctor. There they stood watching.

Slowly, humbly, Jim came to the girl's resting place.

"Gr—Grace," he whispered timidly. "Oh, Jim, I've had such a good sleep—and I saw the boy—my baby—and now, dear, won't you take me to him?" Anxious pleading in his eyes, Jim raised them to the old people standing together across the room and understood the significance of the man's own closed eyes.

"Sleep again, dear," he said, "and then—then if you're well enough—"

Once more he placed his hands on the girl's head, and once again that something in him soothed the distracted mind. She closed her eyes and peace was there.

"There's but one way to save her brain," he said solemnly, "and you James Alton, must sacrifice a man's proudest possession to do it."

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