

# 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. Before taking his train he finds a hand-bag which his brother drops by a young woman sitting near him. Mrs. Grace Gordon, at the moment a telegram was handed to her, is unable to return the bag. Alton boards his train, and during the night the bag is stolen from him, but subsequently recovered. He arrives 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 him to his house, where, to the amazement of all, the girl rushes to Alton and throws her arms about his neck, calling him "Jim."

It develops that Grace has been made insane by news contained in the telegram that her brother and baby have been burnt to death in the fire which nearly destroyed Chanton, and seeing Jim, she restores her mind, but she is unable to restore her brother's. Jordan says that Jim must go to the world as a distant relative, but honor Grace in her bed. But he is her brother. That night Jim captures a giant gypsy on the porch and sends him to jail, where Frank Black takes up his defense. Meantime Grace finds a scrap of paper about the bag, apparently a note, but which Jim interprets as meaning that possibly his own father knows something about the missing baby. He resolves to go to New York to ascertain, but is brought back by a constable from the next morning, and the sheriff hands him a postal card which Jim, after reading, starts to tear up, but Black catches it from him, declaring that it will be wanted for evidence.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

HELD.

"LL take that postal card," said Black.

"As District attorney, sheriff, or just general interferer in other people's business?" demanded Jim, now desperately disgusted with the whole affair.

"Well, then," and Black remembered that he had no authority over the prisoner, who happens to live there, but in so doing encounters Frank Black, an important personage, in love with Grace. Black accompanies him to his house, where, to the amazement of all, the girl rushes to Alton and throws her arms about his neck, calling him "Jim."

"Give it to me, Alton," said Sheriff Bill.

"I suppose I am to have some sort of an examination," and Jim handed the postal over to the sheriff. "When will it be?"

"Squire Baldwin is waiting now, so we can go right along."

Knowing well that the evidence against him now was far stronger than it had been at any other time, Jim, accompanied by the sheriff and Black, started again for the office of the police justice.

"Wall," commented Squire Baldwin when the young man was brought before him, "seems that ye lied to me, Alton?"

"Yes?"

"Wall, I hereby inform ye that ye hev a right ter counsel, an' thet anything ye say may be used again ye. Thet's the statutory protection that the beightled law gives to a man accused of an offence."

"I want no lawyer," muttered Jim. "Go ahead."

"Wall, then, I understand, Mr. Black, thet ye hev been deputized by the district attorney ter protect the interests of the people in this matter?"

"Yes, and I will first give my testimony. Swear me, please."

The oath was administered, and Black told his story in quick, confident words.

"A few mornings ago I saw this man Alton, a stranger in town, carrying a peculiar-shaped black bag which I at once recognized as belonging to one of our ladies of Chanton. I told him to give it to me—he was very shabby at the time, and looked suspiciously like a tramp—but he refused, saying that he was going to return the bag to its owner."

"What did ye see him?" interjected the squire. "This is a very particular pint in the mind of the court."

"Coming out of the hotel, the bar-room I think, but I am not positive."

"Mornin' drinks is bad, very bad," muttered Squire Baldwin, audibly.

"Wall," continued Black, "he ended by my accompanying him to the home of the owner of the bag and forcing him to deliver it there. They apparently knew, but—"

"Your honor," exclaimed Jim, "would you limit the witness to the points necessary to hold me? It does not matter."

"All right," acquiesced Black, with a strange glance at Alton. "I understand what he means. Well, I left him there after he had delivered the bag I spoke of. Now," and Black rose from his chair, "I will call as a witness the lady sitting in the other room—Mrs. Graham."

Alton looked up quickly, shame and anger in his face.

"What is the necessity of this, your honor?" he said. "Let him tell what he knows. He can testify to enough, I warrant."

"Young man," and the old justice was severe, "Chanton law does not countenance hearsay evidence. The prosecuting attorney and I have conferred and I hev stated ter him that though the case agin ye looks purty plain, he must prove it with competent evidence. Agin the court says proceed."

Black had stepped into the rear room and now emerged bringing Mrs. Graham with him. Instinctively Jim rose to his feet, but the woman seemed unconscious of his presence.

"Will you sit there," said Black, pointing to the witness chair, "and be sworn?"

Mrs. Graham took the seat indicated, and the oath, and nervously waited for Black's questions.

"Will you kindly tell the court," he began, "what you saw Mrs. Gordon find in the bag which was returned by the prisoner?"

Black looked delighted in using the word.

"I saw her take from the bag this chain," she replied in a low voice, holding up the tiny thing of gold.

Critically Squire Baldwin examined it, then handed it back to the witness.

"And," continued Black, "where did you see that chain before you left for New York with Mrs. Gordon, previous to the fire?"

"On her baby's neck."

"And there it was left?"

"Yes, in a whisp'er."

"And this prisoner—the words were dramatic—"this prisoner gave you the bag which contained it the morning you arrived from the city, saying it had been dropped there?"

"Yes."

Black looked about the room confidently, waiting for the full force of the story to hit his audience.

"I think that is all, Mrs. Graham," he said. "Will you wait again in the other room in case we need you?"

"Now," he continued when she had gone, "I think the court will take judicial notice of the testimony taken at the gypsy's examination this morning, and what the boy Alton said about being called home by his father."

"The court will," responded Squire Baldwin decisively.

"Then," went on Black with finality, "all that is necessary to do is to introduce in evidence the postal card which came today to the prisoner from his father, a card which you have already seen, Squire Baldwin."

The old man nodded his head as the sheriff handed Black the card, torn half in two. Impressively he read it aloud, unable to refrain from satisfying the curiosity of the audience.

"I got your letter, Jim," he read, "and tell you never to write to me again. I have not written to you since you went away, which it's lucky you did for your own good, and don't want you to write me. I don't want to see you any more. And that silly thing you called our code I have forgot long ago, and you may as well do the same. I'm going where you can't find me if you should want your dad when you're bust. I'm sending this or a postal because it's all I've got, and I ain't got 2 cents to buy a stamp and I don't care who sees it anyway. From your father, and may it do you no good."

There was absolute silence when Black had finished, and Jim's face was almost crimson with the shame of it all.

"This," exclaimed Black, "came straight from New York, and must have been written after the message Alton says was delivered by the gypsy, which fact strengthens the case against the prisoner."

"Now," remarked Squire Baldwin, slowly, "what hes the defendant got ter say 'bout his story ter me, the court, thet the message wuz from his father—business smatters an' sech like?"

"I've got nothing to say," replied Jim. "There's no use."

"Then this court—and the old man pronounced his words as though the death penalty were to result from them—holds the prisoner to wait the action of the grand jury, which will investigate his connection with the abduction of a baby. Sheriff Bill Jones, take him away."

"And perhaps it would be well to inform the prisoner that the grand jury will not meet until three months from now," remarked Black casually.

"May I speak to Mrs. Graham a moment?" asked Jim of the justice.

"Yes, Alton."

"Watch him, sheriff," exclaimed Black as Jim stepped through the doorway into the next room.

Mrs. Graham was there alone, crying softly.

"Oh, I don't understand it all, Jim," she said as he entered.

"As well come out all right, Mrs. Graham. Where's the doctor?"

"I don't know. I don't know. He hasn't been near us since this morning."

"And Grace—how is she?" Jim's face was turned from her as he put the question.

"She's all right, Jim, but so quiet,"

and Mrs. Graham rose. "Here, Jim," she added, holding out to him the baby's chain which had played so important a part in the affair. "Grace handed this to me just a little while ago and told me to send it to you to give baby. How she supposed I knew where you were, I cannot imagine; but take it, and may it bring you luck—oh, I don't understand it all."

Again she was weeping, and Jim, taking the chain, placed it safely in his pocket and turned to leave.

"Oh, Mrs. Graham," he said suddenly, "will you do up my old clothes and leave them—leave them out in the woodshed, please."

And then Jim entered the office where the sheriff motioned him toward the door.

"Editor Banley out for his night run towards and back," observed the sheriff, interrupting himself. "He's got the only automobile in town."

"Where's Madrid?" asked Jim, thinking that a knowledge of the country about might some day prove useful to him.

"Ten miles down the State road. It's on a railroad, but Chanton ain't but it's funny that town ain't never built up much."

The sheriff rambled on and meantime the car came nearer and nearer. At last Bill's story came to an end and at the same time two brilliant lights appeared in the night beyond the corner of the nearby county clerk's office. The automobile seemed to slow down and at last, just in front of the jail, it came to a stop.

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"There was silence outside, whereupon the sheriff laughed.

"Better get a horse," he cried, "Come on, Alton," he added, "let's see what's the matter."

Eager to divert his mind from the morbid thoughts which now possessed him, Jim gladly accompanied the good-natured sheriff down the path to the street where stood the silent machine.

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"Let me examine it, sir," volunteered Jim, "I've worked in a garage and know all about a car."

"Want to know?" exclaimed Sheriff Bill, proud of the knowledge of one of his "punks."

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Slowly he walked toward the jail, while Jim, pretending to putter about the machine, watched through the darkness.

The moment he was inside the door, as near as Jim could guess, Alton started the machine's engine, jumped into the car. In the very face and eyes of the startled editor, and was off down the State road.

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From the jail came the sheriff, running, but all he saw was a cloud of dust now nearly half a mile away. Jim, the clutch in high speed, was enjoying himself for the first time that day, and as the car rushed along over the good road he blessed the conservatism of the folk of Chanton for their failure to invest in more than one automobile.

His pleasure was not marred by the knowledge that it would be absolutely impossible for him to take the train at Madrid, should there prove to be any at that time of night, for he had another plan. And so the excitement of the escape and the ride got in his blood.

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when two more headlights flashed bright before him. They came from a car standing still at the side of the road.

Slowly Jim approached and stopped his machine a few feet from the other. "Nice country this," came a voice. "Trouble?" inquired Jim.

"No," of gasoline, and everything in the town I just went through is locked up. The town itself is four miles back there and the station about a mile. Nice country?"

"Funny coincidence," rejoined Jim. Then, "Are you a stranger about here?"

"Yes, I have run over from Vermont. No trouble till now."

"Tell you what I'll do," said Jim, suddenly. "I run this car over from Chanton to catch the train that's due here in about half an hour. I was going to leave it here till day after tomorrow. But it's borrowed, and I'd like to get it back tonight if I could. Leave your car here, no one can run away with it if there's no gasoline in the tank, take this one back to Chanton, get your gasoline and the owner—he's a nice fellow and would be glad to see you. I'll walk on to the station. It can't be more than half a mile."

"That's all right," Jim telephone from the station that you're coming. Get in."

The stranger climbed down from his machine with alacrity and jumped in to Editor Banley's, while Jim stepped to the ground.

"The owner lives in the big white house about a hundred yards beyond the first electric light you come to inside the corporation. You can't miss it. Good-by."

"Good-by, and good luck," said the stranger, and Editor Banley's car started homeward.

Jim started on a run for the station and was but a few rods from it, moving carefully through the darkness when the headlights of an engine appeared far up the track.

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"Of course he has telephoned," was Jim's thought, "and I'd be safe on that train about three minutes. But they will be kept wondering how I did it."

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CHAPTER XXV.  
A FAIR EXCHANGE.

THE old county jail was a queer place, its reputation for hospitality having become so widespread among the vagabonds of the North country that many of them chose to spend their winters there rather than make an effort to get enough work to keep them alive.

The sheriff, though a conscientious officer of the law, possessed such a big heart that he could not conceive of any man being habitually bad. He treated each prisoner as though he had made but a temporary slip and would soon become once more a respected citizen.

The discipline was, therefore, usually lax, and the remarkable fact was often commented upon that there had been but one successful escape from this institution, and that before the present regime.

As Sheriff Bill entered the cell to which Jim had been assigned, bringing his supper, he remarked proudly on this fact.

"So you won't have a bad time here," he said. "Looks pretty clear again you, the case does, but I don't believe nothing till I see it proved."

Alton smiled a bit, and began to eat. When he had finished the seriousness of his predicament appalled him. Not that he minded much the confinement, but the thought of Grace laid looking for his return was almost unbearable.

The slight of the darkening evening sky, seen through the bars beyond his open window, made liberty itself seem sweet and Jim pressed his face against the iron thills which kept that liberty from becoming his.

He was in this position when suddenly he heard a grunt, coming from his left. Looking in that direction along the wall of the jail building, he saw him, not five feet from him, another barred window. And behind those bars he could see the projecting nose and mouth of a face.

"Ugh," came the noise again from the lips beneath the nose.

"What is it?" said Jim, just above a whisper.

"Read English?" came next.

"Yes."

The nose and lips disappeared, and Jim waited, wondering.

In a moment he saw a hand thrust through the bars of the window near him. Then came a small white object which seemed to dance about in the dusk.

After many grations the thing soared through the air, dashed against Jim's face, pressed to the bars.

"Read to me," again came the voice.

Alton took the white thing, which proved to be a slip of paper stuck on the end of a long stiff wire, which, in the dimness of the evening could not be seen against the dark green of the foliage outside the jail.

He turned from the window to do as his ignorant neighbor had requested, when there came the sound of a key in the lock of his cell door.

Hastily Alton slipped the paper into his pocket and waited.

"Say, Alton," said the sheriff, picking up Jim's supper dishes, "I guess I'll move you. The windy of your cell is purty close to the one next, and that big gypsy's got that one. If there is any conspiracy between you I suppose it wouldn't be a good idea to have you so near together. Come on."

They passed through a long hall and

stood by the front entrance to the jail. The sheriff laid the supper dishes on a table and turned to the young man.

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Slowly Jim approached and stopped his machine a few feet from the other. "Nice country this," came a voice. "Trouble?" inquired Jim.

"No," of gasoline, and everything in the town I just went through is locked up. The town itself is four miles back there and the station about a mile. Nice country?"

"Funny coincidence," rejoined Jim. Then, "Are you a stranger about here?"

"Yes, I have run over from Vermont. No trouble till now."

"Tell you what I'll do," said Jim, suddenly. "I run this car over from Chanton to catch the train that's due here in about half an hour. I was going to leave it here till day after tomorrow. But it's borrowed, and I'd like to get it back tonight if I could. Leave your car here, no one can run away with it if there's no gasoline in the tank, take this one back to Chanton, get your gasoline and the owner—he's a nice fellow and would be glad to see you. I'll walk on to the station. It can't be more than half a mile."

"That's all right," Jim telephone from the station that you're coming. Get in."

The stranger climbed down from his machine with alacrity and jumped in to Editor Banley's, while Jim stepped to the ground.

"The owner lives in the big white house about a hundred yards beyond the first electric light you come to inside the corporation. You can't miss it. Good-by."

"Good-by, and good luck," said the stranger, and Editor Banley's car started homeward.

Jim started on a run for the station and was but a few rods