

The Withered Hand

by Marah Crosse, Spinster

All the afternoon the rain had poured down in torrents, and, at the early twilight of a bleak autumnal day gathered over the drear landscape, I drew closely the shutters of my office windows, and, turning the gas down, prepared to enjoy a cozy reverie.

The storm grew louder and fiercer. The wind howled dismally through the crevices, and my little wooden sign creaked and groaned on its iron hinges.

As I sat lost in the mazy depths of my fancies, fairyland, there came a loud and imperative knock upon my office door.

Muttering something not at all complimentary to evening callers, I arose and answered the unwelcome summons.

A slight, boyish figure, enveloped in a large black cloak which covered him from head to foot, stood leaning wearily against the railing of the steps.

“Is this Dr. Merriam?”

The voice was singularly clear and sweet, and, with a little thrill of curiosity, I stepped back and bade the intruder enter.

I turned on the gas, which instantly filled the room with a sudden flood of light, and wheeling a great arm-chair before the fire, requested him to be seated.

But, to my surprise, with a most decided gesture, he declined, and turning to the street door, locked it, and put the key in his pocket.

The movement filled me with indignation, and I was about demanding an explanation, when he advanced to where I was standing, and throwing aside the heavy cloak, extended his left hand which was mutilated horribly, and bleeding in a very profuse manner.

“Do not fear me,” he said rapidly, “I merely locked the door to prevent intrusion. I called to have this wounded member properly bandaged, and beg that you will be as expeditious as possible.

“Fear him!” I smiled at the absurd idea, for the fellow was not as large as an ordinarily sized girl, and I would as soon have thought of being taken captive by a mosquito as of being worsted in a hand-to-hand encounter with him.

But I made no reply, and procuring bandages and splinters went to work.

It was a very ugly wound indeed. The whole hand looked as if it had been chewed and bitten, while the forefinger was entirely gone.

“How in the deuce,” I ejaculated, “did you manage to get hurt so?”

He shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

“Le diable!” he burst out passionately. “Do up the thing. I’ll pay a good price.”

Then, as if ashamed of his rudeness, he continued more civilly.

“However, as you ‘medicine men’ know everything. I shall have to tell you that I happened to have a little ‘difficulty,’ and got the worst of it.”

I perceived that he did not like to converse about it, so I did not refer to it again.

He wore his broad-rimmed hat slouched down over his eyes, and I could only see the lower part of his face, which was round, dimpled and womanish in the extreme.

But he bore pain with a fortitude I never saw equalled. Not a groan escaped him, though his face was covered with perspiration, and his lips were white with agony, but, when the operation was over, with an attempt at bravado, he asked how long ere the hand would be well again, and when I told him it would be useless forever, he said nothing, but, laying a roll of bills on the table, unlocked the door, and in another instant I was alone.

I picked up the roll of bills, and, counting them, was surprised to find myself the happy possessor of \$500 more than I was ere my one night’s work, and, congratulating myself on the pleasant fact, got into my bed in a most exultant frame of mind; for the little village wherein I hung out my shingle boasted two disciples of the healing art besides myself, and I am free to confess that patients and filthy lucre were provokingly scarce.

The next morning I was shocked to hear the astounding story that old John Bradley, of the neighboring village, had been found dead in bed, his throat cut from ear to ear.

Old Bradley was a miser, and lived alone, with the exception of a girl, now grown to young ladyhood, whom, in a rare instance of charity, he had rescued from the gutters of Boston, and adopted as his own. She would lie with more ease than any one else could tell the truth. She could, and did, steal with a facility almost marvellous. While her stock of “Billingsgate” was of the choicest description, and beggared anything of the kind the villagers had ever seen.

She was singularly handsome, but her temper was as high-strung as her face was pretty; and ten years previous, when old John had been forced to send her to the Reform School, her rage and anger knew no bounds. But all that was past. After her return. Bradley had purchased an elegant outfit for his vicious ward, and sent her to a distant city to a fashionable ladies’ school, from which she had just returned an accomplished lady of nineteen.

About 9 o'clock an inquest was held, and myself and colleagues met at Bradley's.

A more hideous-looking corpse I never beheld than the one stretched out before me. The face was thin and shrunken, and long, livid scratches ran horizontally over the cheeks, while, extending from ear to ear, ran a deep, jagged gash, from which the blood had oozed, and lay in a congealed mass around him.

Bending over him, and endeavoring to close his mouth, I perceived a white substance between his teeth.

To draw it forth was the work of an instant. A cold chill crept over me as I laid it down. It was a white, slender finger—the finger of a delicate left hand.

John Bradley had been murdered; and like a flash of lightning it burst upon me that his [murderer] was none other than my visitor of the previous evening. I explained the case, as soon as I could command myself, to my colleagues, and claimed the ghastly clue to the perpetration of the terrible crime.

We determined to say nothing concerning our discovery for a time, but calling in the services of the secret police, we flattered ourselves that ere long we would be enabled to deliver the assassin into the hands of the authorities.

Bradley's adopted daughter, immediately upon being apprised of the death of her guardian, had gone into a violent fit of hysterics, and bolting her chamber door, positively refused companionship of any kind. I saw her at the funeral two days later.

She was very pale, and her appearance indicated that she had indulged in a most exhaustive fit of weeping. I had never seen her before, to my knowledge; still there seemed a strangely familiar air about her for which I could not account. She was dressed in deep mourning, wore a Russian sable collarette, and carried a muff of the same; indeed, her whole appearance was elegant in the extreme. The young lady wept softly from the depths of a costly and exquisite mouchoir, and I noticed the hand that held the elegant trifle was white and small, displaying to good advantage a valuable diamond ring. I glanced at the girl curiously, and thought of all the stories I had heard concerning her queer, uncanny childhood; and as the prosy minister descanted upon the merits of the deceased, I speculated upon the future course of the heiress of all old Bradley's hoarded thousands.

The will was short and concise, beginning with the usual formula and ending with the sentence—

“Do will and bequeath to my adopted daughter, Jaqueline Roseni Bradley, the sum of \$15,000 in the First National Bank, together with all real estate and personal property belonging to me. Wherewith, in token of the same, I affix my name hereunto.
JOHN BRADLEY.”

Witnesses {H. BLANY

Miss Bradley did not seem to feel elated over her good fortune, but took it quite as a matter of course. Her quiet behavior elicited a great deal of speculative gossip from the villagers, but as she was very reticent, village curiosity was unsatisfied. There was something mysterious about the girl. I felt that the first time I saw her. But after the first few weeks the excitement gradually calmed down, and in the busy search for additional knowledge of the mysterious assassin, I dismissed her from my thoughts.

But time passed, and with all our efforts we were still as much in the dark as when we first began. A year went round, but long before Miss Bradley had sold the estate and gone, none knew where, I still kept up the search; but it was useless, and, tired out, I almost concluded to give it up entirely, when, one evening, I received a letter from my nephew, Tom Hanford containing a pressing invitation to come to the Holly Lodge and make him a long visit. Our own little village was unusually dull, and everybody persisted in pertaining a vulgar degree of good health, positively discouraging to a poverty-stricken physician in a country town. So, packing a change of linen in my valise, I started.

Tom met me at the depot, and giving me a most cordial welcome, conducted me to his home.

Now Tom, at that time, was a single man, but I soon perceived by the drift of his conversation that he was no longer heart-whole, and that as soon as his innamorata gave him a favorable reply, he would metamorphose himself into a benedict.

It was nothing but Helen from morning till night, and I gladly availed myself of the opportunity to call and see his paragon of perfection.

I recognized her instantly as none other than the Miss Bradley, of Bradleyford.

In commenting on her appearance that evening to Tom, I asked, carelessly, why she carried her hand bandaged so closely.

He believed she had an eruption or something of the sort; did not exactly know; she had always had it so since he had first known her.

I felt a sudden suspicion, but could not account for it, but when morning came had almost forgotten the matter.

Three weeks passed pleasantly away, and it being the anniversary of my birthday, Tom vowed there should be a fete in honor of it, so the young people of the neighborhood were invited, and everything went off as smoothly as wedding bells, until it was nearly time for the party to break up, when there came up a terrible storm.

It continued to rain with a steady drip, drip, and drizzle, which effectually precluded the idea of returning home, and our guests were obliged to remain another night with us.

I noticed that Miss Bradley grew restless and uneasy beneath my gaze, and when my eyes rested upon her bandaged hand, she grew pale to the lips. She early excused herself on the second evening and went to her room. It so happened that my apartment was on the same floor, and, in fact, was separated from hers only by a thin partition, and as soon as decency would permit, I slipped up the stairs, and opening the door softly entered my own room.

I stepped on a chair and looking cautiously through the partition beheld Miss Bradley on her knees before the lamp, the bandages removed from her left hand, which for the first time I beheld free from its swathings.

It was withered, and minus a finger. Instantly that black autumnal midnight, and my singular vision, rose before my mental vision, and with a sickening sense of horror I sat down on the edge of the bed to think.

My night-lamp burned low, and the great clock in the hall chimed the hour of twelve, ere I fell into a dose. I slept but lightly. Visions of the murdered man danced before my eyes; awake, and grinning faces haunted my dreams.

I heard the door turn slowly on its hinges, and a light, firm step sounded softly on the thick pile of the carpet. My heart gave a great bound. I looked through half-closed lids toward the door and beheld Miss Bradley, in a loose white wrapper, advancing to my bedside. Her long dark hair, unbound, floated over her shoulders in waves of jet, and her eyes were wide open, strangely fixed and glaring.

She was muttering to herself. It seemed as though I could not move, but seemed as if held in a vice.

As she stopped by my bed I caught the bright gleam of a dagger shining in the glare of the night lamp.

Miss Bradley looked at me long and earnestly.

“Yes, I killed him,” she muttered, “I killed him; he fought, though, like a lion. I wanted money. I shall kill this one, because I am not safe while he lives.”

She held up her knife, which looked bright and sharp in the lamplight.

“Not three minutes to live,” she continued hoarsely. “May the Lord have mercy on you.”

She swung the knife slowly in a circle over her head; then, with a quick bound, I sprang up, and in another instant, pinioned her to the floor, calling loudly for help.

She struggled desperately, but her efforts availed her nothing.

Tom—I never saw so haggard a countenance as his was when I related the circumstances, and the officers led her away to the county jail.

But long before her trial was to have been, the unhappy girl was found dead in her cell, leaving a written confession of her guilt, and the manner in which she had committed the atrocious crime. I still keep the finger as a memento of the very near escape I had from death.

Tom, after long years, married an amiable and lovely woman, but there is always a latent touch of sadness in his tone, and a look of sorrow lurking in the shadow of his eyes, which I, who know his past, so well, know was caused by the beautiful but demoniacal owner of the Withered Hand.

The Charleston Daily Supplement, December 24, 1870