

GREEN ANNA KATHARINE

THE BRONZE HAND

Anna Green
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The Bronze Hand / 1897:

Содержание

| | |
|--|----|
| I. THE FASCINATING UNKNOWN | 4 |
| II. THE QUAKER-LIKE GIRL, THE PALE GIRL, AND THE MAN WITH A BRISTLING MUSTACHE | 15 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 19 |

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I. THE FASCINATING UNKNOWN

HER room was on the ground floor of the house we mutually inhabited, and mine directly above it, so that my opportunities for seeing her were limited to short glimpses of her auburn head as she leaned out of the window to close her shutters at night or open them in the morning. Yet our chance encounter in the hall or on the walk in front, had made so deep an impression upon my sensibilities that I was never without the vision of her pale face set off by the aureole of reddish brown hair, which, since my first meeting with her, had become for me the symbol of everything beautiful, incomprehensible and strange.

For my fellow-lodger was a mystery.

I am a busy man now, but just at the time of which I speak, I had leisure in abundance.

I was sharing with many others the unrest of the perilous days subsequent to the raid of John Brown at Harper's Ferry. Abraham Lincoln had been elected President. Baltimore, where the incidents I am relating transpired, had become the headquarters of men who secretly leagued themselves in antagonism to the North. Men and women who felt that their Northern brethren

had grievously wronged them planned to undermine the stability of the government. The schemes at this time were gigantic in their conception and far-reaching in their scope and endless ramifications.

Naturally under these conditions, a consciousness of ever-present danger haunted every thinking mind. The candor of the outspoken was regarded with doubt, and the reticence of the more cautious, with distrust. It was a trying time for sensitive, impressionable natures with nothing to do. Perhaps all this may account for the persistency with which I sat in my open window. I was thus sitting one night—a memorable one to me—when I heard a sharp exclamation from below, in a voice I had long listened for.

Any utterance from those lips would have attracted my attention; but, filled as this was with marked, if not extraordinary, emotion, I could not fail to be roused to a corresponding degree of curiosity and interest.

Thrusting out my head, I cast a rapid glance downward. A shutter swinging in the wind, and the escaping figure of a man hurrying round the corner of the street, were all that rewarded my scrutiny; though, from the stream of light issuing from the casement beneath, I perceived that her window, like my own, was wide open.

As I continued to watch this light, I saw her thrust out her head with an eagerness indicative of great excitement. Peering to right and left, she murmured some suppressed words mixed with

gasps of such strong feeling that I involuntarily called out:

“Excuse me, madam, have you been frightened in any way by the man I saw running away from here a moment ago?”

She gave a great start and glanced up. I see her face yet—beautiful, wonderful; so beautiful and so wonderful I have never been able to forget it. Meeting my eye, she faltered out:

“Did you see a man running away from here? Oh, sir, if I might have a word with you!”

I came near leaping directly to the pavement in my ardor and anxiety to oblige her, but, remembering before it was too late that she was neither a Juliet nor I a Romeo, I merely answered that I would be with her in a moment and betook myself below by the less direct but safer means of the staircase.

It was a short one and I was but a moment in descending, but that moment was long enough for my heart to acquire a most uncomfortable throb, and it was with anything but an air of quiet self-possession that I approached the threshold I had never before dared to cross even in fancy.

The door was open and I caught one glimpse of her figure before she was aware of my presence. She was contemplating her right hand with a look of terror, which, added to her striking personality, made her seem at the instant a creature of alarming characteristics fully as capable of awakening awe as devotion.

I may have given some token of the agitation her appearance awakened, for she turned towards me with sudden vehemence.

“Oh!” she cried, with a welcoming gesture; “you are the

gentleman from up-stairs who saw a man running away from here a moment ago. Would you know that man if you saw him again?"

"I am afraid not," I replied. "He was only a flying figure in my eyes."

"Oh!" she moaned, bringing her hands together in dismay. But, immediately straightening herself, she met my regard with one as direct as my own. "I need a friend," she said, "and I am surrounded by strangers."

I made a move towards her; I did not feel myself a stranger. But how was I to make her realize the fact?

"If there is anything I can do," I suggested.

Her steady regard became searching.

"I have noticed you before to-night," she declared, with a directness devoid of every vestige of coquetry. "You seem to have qualities that may be trusted. But the man capable of helping me needs the strongest motives that influence humanity: courage, devotion, discretion, and a total forgetfulness of self. Such qualifications cannot be looked for in a stranger."

As if with these words she dismissed me from her thoughts, she turned her back upon me. Then, as if recollecting the courtesy due even to strangers, she cast me an apologetic glance over her shoulder and hurriedly added:

"I am bewildered by my loss. Leave me to the torment of my thoughts. You can do nothing for me."

Had there been the least evidence of falsity in her tone or the slightest striving after effect in her look or bearing, I would

have taken her at her word and left her then and there. But the candor of the woman and the reality of her emotion were not to be questioned, and moved by an impulse as irresistible as it was foolhardy, I cried with the impetuosity of my twenty-one years:

“I am ready to risk my life for you. Why, I do not know and do not care to ask. I only know you could have found no other man so willing to do your bidding.”

A smile, in which surprise was tempered by a feeling almost tender, crossed her lips and immediately vanished. She shook her head as if in deprecation of the passion my words evinced, and was about to dismiss me, when she suddenly changed her mind and seized upon the aid I had offered, with a fervor that roused my sense of chivalry and deepened what might have been but a passing fancy into an active and all-engrossing passion.

“I can read faces,” said she, “and I have read yours. You will do for me what I cannot do for myself, but—Have you a mother living?”

I answered no; that I was very nearly without relatives or ties.

“I am glad,” she said, half to herself. Then with a last searching look, “Have you not even a sweetheart?”

I must have reddened painfully, for she drew back with a hesitating and troubled air; but the vigorous protest I hastened to make seemed to reassure her, for the next word she uttered was one of confidence.

“I have lost a ring.” She spoke in a low but hurried tone. “It was snatched from my finger as I reached out my hand to close

my shutters. Some one must have been lying in wait; some one who knows my habits and the hour at which I close my window for the night. The loss I have sustained is greater than you can conceive. It means more, much more, than appears. To the man who will bring me back that ring direct from the hand that stole it, I would devote the gratitude of a lifetime. Are you willing to make the endeavor? It is a task I cannot give to the police.”

This request, so different from any I had expected, checked my enthusiasm in proportion as it awoke a senseless jealousy.

“Yet it seems directly in their line,” I suggested, seeing nothing but humiliation before me if I attempted the recovery of a simple love-token.

“I know that it must seem so to you,” she admitted, reading my thoughts and answering them with skilful indirectness. “But what policeman would undertake a difficult and minute search for an article whose intrinsic value would not reach five dollars?”

“Then it is only a memento,” I stammered, with very evident feeling.

“Only a memento,” she repeated; “but not of love. Worthless as it is in itself, it would buy everything I possess, and almost my soul to-night. I can explain no further. Will you attempt its recovery?”

Restored to myself by her frank admission that it was no lover’s keepsake I was urged to recapture and return, I allowed the powerful individuality of this woman to have its full effect upon me. Taking in with one glance her beauty, the impassioned

fervor of her nature, and the subtle charm of a spirit she now allowed to work its full spell upon me, I threw every practical consideration to the winds, and impetuously replied:

“I will endeavor to regain this ring for you. Tell me where to go, and whom to attack, and if human wit and strength can compass it, you shall have the jewel back before morning.

“Oh!” she protested, “I see that you anticipate a task of small difficulty. You cannot recover this particular ring so easily as that. In the first place, I do not in the least know who took it; I only know its destination. Alas! if it is allowed to reach that destination, I am bereft of hope.”

“No love token,” I murmured, “and yet your whole peace depends on its recovery.”

“More than my peace,” she answered; and with a quick movement she closed the door which I had left open behind me. As its sharp bang rang through the room, I realized into what a pitfall I had stumbled. Only a political intrigue of the most desperate character could account for the words I had heard and the actions to which I had been a witness. But I was in no mood to recoil even from such dangers as these, and so my look showed her as she leaned toward me with the words:

“Listen! I am burdened with a secret. I am in this house, in this city, for a purpose. The secret is not my own and I cannot part with it; neither is my purpose communicable. You therefore will be obliged to deal with the greatest dangers blindfold. One encouragement only I can give you. You will work for good ends.

You are pitted against wrong, not right, and if you succumb, it will be in a cause you yourself would call noble. Do I make myself understood, Mr.—Mr. —”

“Abbott,” I put in, with a bow.

She took the bow for an affirmative, as indeed I meant she should. “You do not recoil,” she murmured, “not even when I say that you must take no third party into your confidence, no matter to what extremity you are brought.”

“I would not be the man I think I am, if I recoiled,” I said, smiling.

She waved her hand with almost a stern air.

“Swear!” she commanded; “swear that, from the moment you leave this door till you return to it, you will breathe no word concerning me, your errand, or even the oath I am now exacting from you.”

“Ah!” thought I to myself, “this is serious.” But I took the oath under the spell of the most forceful personality I had ever met, and did not regret it—*then*.

“Now let us waste no more time,” said she.

“In the large building on – Street there is an office with the name of Dr. Merriam on the door. See! I have written it on this card, so that there may be no mistake about it. That office is open to patients from ten in the morning until twelve at noon. During these hours any one can enter there; but to awaken no distrust, he should have some ailment. Have you not some slight disorder concerning which you might consult a physician?”

"I doubt it," said I; "but I might manufacture one."

"That would not do with Dr. Merriam. He is a skilful man; he would see through any imposture."

"I have a sick friend," I ruminated. "And by the way, his case is obscure and curious. I could interest any doctor in it in five minutes."

"That is good; consult him in regard to your friend; meantime—while you are waiting for the interview, I mean—take notice of a large box you will find placed on a side-table. Do not seem to fix your attention on it, but never let it be really out of your sight from the moment the door is unlocked at ten till you are forced by the doctor's importunity to leave the room at twelve. If you are alone there for one minute (and you will be allowed to remain there alone if you show no haste to consult the doctor) unlock that box—here is the key—and look carefully inside. No one will interfere and no one will criticize you; there is more than one person who has access to that box."

"But—" I put in.

"You will discover there," she whispered, "a hand of bronze lying on an enamelled cushion. On the fingers of this hand there should be, and doubtless are, rings of forged steel of peculiar workmanship. *If there is one on the middle finger*, my cause is lost, and I can only await the end." Her cheek paled. "*But if there is not*, you may be sure that an attempt will be made by some one to-morrow—I do not know whom—to put one there before the office closes at noon. The ring will be mine—the one stolen

from my hand just now—and it will be your business to prevent the box being opened for this purpose, by any means short of public interference involving arrest and investigation; for this, too, would be fatal. The delay of a day may be of incalculable service to me. It would give me time to think, if not to act. Does the undertaking seem a hopeless one? Am I asking too much of your inexperience?”

“It does not seem a hopeful one,” I admitted; “but I am willing to undertake the adventure. What are its dangers? And why, if I see the ring on the finger you speak of, cannot I take it off and bring it back to you?”

“Because,” said she, answering the last question first, “the ring becomes a part of the mechanism the moment it is thrust over the last joint. You could not draw it off. As for the dangers I allude to, they are of a hidden character, and part of the secret I mentioned. If, however, you exercise your wit, your courage, and a proper amount of strategy, you may escape. Interference must be *proved* against you. That rule, at least, has been held inviolate.”

Aghast at the mysterious perils she thus indicated in the path toward which she was urging me, I for one instant felt an impulse to retreat. But adventure of any kind has its allurements for an unoccupied youth of twenty-one, and when seasoned, as this was, by a romantic, if unreasonable, passion, proved altogether too irresistible for me to give it up. Laughing outright in my endeavor to throw off the surplus of my excitement, I drew myself up and uttered some fiery phrase of courage, which I doubt if she even

heard. Then I said some word about the doctor, which she at once caught up.

“The doctor,” said she, “may know, and may not know, the mysteries of that box. I would advise you to treat him solely as a doctor. He who uses the key you now hold in your hand cannot be too wary; by which I mean too careful or too silent. Oh, that I dared to go there myself! But my agitation would betray me. Besides, my person is known, or this ring would never have been taken from me.

“I will be your deputy,” I assured her. “Have you any further instructions?”

“No,” said she; “instructions are useless in an affair of this kind. Your actions must be determined by the exigencies of the moment. Meantime, my every thought will be yours. Good-night, sir; pray God, it may not be good-by.”

“One moment,” I said, as I arose to go. “Have you any objection to telling me your name?”

“I am Miss Calhoun,” she said, with a graceful bow.

This was the beginning of my formidable adventure with the bronze hand.

II. THE QUAKER-LIKE GIRL, THE PALE GIRL, AND THE MAN WITH A BRISTLING MUSTACHE

THE building mentioned by my new-found friend was well known to me. It was one of the kind in which every other office is unoccupied the year round. Such tenants as gave it the little air of usefulness it possessed were of the bad-pay kind. They gave little concern to their own affairs and less to those of their neighbors. The public avoided the building, and the tenants did nothing to encourage a change. In a populous city, on the corner made by frequented streets, it stood as much alone and neglected as if it were a ruin. Old or young eyes may have looked through its begrimed windows into the busy thoroughfare beneath, but none in the street ever honored the old place with a glance or thought. No one even wasted contempt upon its smoky walls, and few disturbed the accumulated dust upon the stairs or in the dimly-lighted hallways.

Had a place been sought for wherein the utmost secrecy might be observed, surely this was that place. As I neared the door upon which I read the doctor's name, I found myself treading on tip-toe, so impressed had I become by a sense of caution, if not of dread.

I had made every effort to be on hand at precisely ten o'clock,

and felt so sure that I had been the first to arrive that I reached out to the door-knob with every expectation of entering, unseen by any one, and possibly unheard. To my dismay, the first twist I gave it resulted in a rusty shriek that set my teeth on edge, and echoed down the gloomy hall. With my flesh creeping, I opened the door and passed into the doctor's outer room.

It was far from being empty. Seated in chairs ranged along two sides of the room, I saw a dozen or more persons, male and female. All wore the preoccupied air that patients are apt to assume while awaiting their turn to be called by the doctor. One amongst the number made an effort at indifference by drawing out and pushing back a nail in the flooring with the sole of her pretty shoe. It may have been intended for coquetry, and at another time might have bewitched me; now it seemed strangely out of place. The man who was to all appearance counting the flies in the web of an industrious spider was more in keeping with the place, my feelings, and the atmosphere of despondency that the room gave out.

As I had no doubt that the ring I was seeking was in the possession of some one of these persons, I gave each as minute an examination as was possible under the circumstances. Only two amongst them appeared open to suspicion. Of these, one was a young man whose naturally fine features would have prepossessed him in my favor had it not been for the peculiar alertness of his bright blue eye, which flashed incessantly in every direction till each and all of us seemed to partake of

his restlessness and anxiety. Why was he not depressed? The other was the girl, or, rather, the young lady to whose pretty foot I have referred. If she was at all conspicuous, it was owing to the contrast between her beautiful face and the Quaker-like simplicity of her dress. She was restless also; her foot had ceased its action, but her hand moved constantly. Now it clutched its fellow in her lap, and now it ran in an oft-repeated action, seemingly beyond her control, up and down and round and round a plain but expensive leather bag she wore at her side. "She carries the ring," thought I, sitting down in the chair next her.

Meantime, I had not been oblivious of *the box*. It stood upon a plain oak table directly opposite the door by which I had come in. It was about a foot square, and was the only object in the room at all ornamental. Indeed, there was but little else for the eye to rest on, consequently most of us looked that way, though I noticed that but few seemed to take any real interest in that or anything else within sight. This was encouraging, and I was on the point of transferring my entire attention to the two persons I have named, when one of them, the nearest, rose hurriedly and went out.

This was an unexpected move on her part, and I did not know what to make of it. Had I annoyed her by my scrutiny, or had she divined my errand? In my doubt, I consulted the face of the man I secretly thought to be her accomplice. It was non-committal, and, in my doubt as to the meaning of all this, I allowed myself to become interested in a pale young woman who had been sitting on the other side of the lady who had just left. She was evidently

a patient who stood in great need of assistance. Her head hung feebly forward, and her whole figure looked ready to drop. Yet when a minute later the door of the inner office opened, and the doctor appeared on the sill in an expectant attitude, she made no attempt to rise, but pushed forward another woman who seemed less indisposed than herself. I had to compel myself to think of all I saw as being real and within my experience.

Surprised by this action on the part of one so ill, I watched the pale girl for an instant, and almost forgot my mission in the compassion aroused by her sickly appearance. But soon that mission and my motive for being in this place were somewhat vividly recalled to me by an unexpected action on this very young woman's part. With the sudden movement of an acutely suffering person, she bounded from her seat and crossed the floor to where the box stood, gasping for breath, and almost falling against the table when she reached it.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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