

The Four-Fingered Hand

By Barry Pain

Charles Yarrow held fours, but as he had come up against Brackley's straight flush they only did him harm, leading him to remark—by no means for the first time—that it did not matter what cards one held, but only when one held them. 'I get out here,' he remarked, with resignation. No one else seemed to care for further play. The two other men left at once, and shortly afterwards Yarrow and Brackley sauntered out of the club together.

'The night's young,' said Brackley; 'if you're doing nothing you may as well come round to me.'

'Thanks, I will. I'll talk, or smoke, or go so far as to drink; but I don't play poker. It's not my night.'

'I didn't know,' said Brackley, 'that you had any superstitions.'

'Haven't. I've only noticed that, as a rule, my luck goes in runs, and that a good run or a bad run usually lasts the length of a night's play. There is probably some simple reason for it, if I were enough of a mathematician to worry it out. In luck as distinct from arithmetic I have no belief at all.'

'I wish you could bring me to that happy condition. The hardheaded man of the world, without a superstition or a belief of any kind, has the best time of it.'

They reached Brackley's chambers, lit pipes, and mixed drinks. Yarrow stretched himself in a lounge chair, and took up the subject again, speaking lazily and meditatively. He was a man of thirty-eight, with a clean shaven face; he looked, as indeed he was, travelled and experienced.

'I don't read any books,' he remarked, 'but I've been twice round the world, and am just about to leave England again. I've been alive for thirty-eight years and during most of them I have been living. Consequently, I've formed opinions, and one of my opinions is that it is better to dispense with superfluous luggage. Prejudices, superstitions, beliefs of any kind that are not capable of easy and immediate proof are superfluous luggage; one goes more easily without them. You implied just now that you had a certain amount of this superfluous luggage, Brackley. What form does it take? Do you turn your chair—are you afraid of thirteen at dinner?'

'No, nothing of that sort. I'll tell you about it. You've heard of my grandfather—who made the money?'

'Heard of him? Had him rubbed into me in my childhood. He's in *Smiles* or one of those books, isn't he? Started life as a navvy, educated himself, invented things, made a fortune, gave vast sums in charity.'

'That is the man. Well, he lived to be a fair age, but he was dead before I was born. What I know of him I know from my father, and some of it is not included in those improving books for the young. For instance, there is no mention in the printed biography of his curious belief in the four-fingered hand. His belief was that from time to time he saw a phantom hand. Sometimes it appeared to him in the daytime, and sometimes at night. It was a right hand with the second finger missing. He always regarded the appearance of the hand as a warning. It meant, he supposed, that he was to stop anything on which he was engaged; if he was about to let a house, buy a horse, go on a journey, or whatever it was, he stopped if he saw the four-fingered hand.'

‘Now, look here,’ said Yarrow, ‘we’ll examine this thing rationally. Can you quote one special instance in which your grandfather saw this maimed hand, broke off a particular project, and found himself benefited?’

‘No. In telling my father about it he spoke quite generally.’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Yarrow, drily. ‘The people who see these things do speak quite generally as a rule.’

‘But wait a moment. This vision of the four-fingered hand appears to have been hereditary. My father also saw it from time to time. And here I can give you the special circumstances. Do you remember the Crewe disaster some years ago? Well, my father had intended to travel by the train that was wrecked. Just as he was getting into the carriage he saw the four-fingered hand. He at once got out and postponed his journey until later in the day. Another occasion was two months before the failure of Varings’. My father banked there. As a rule he kept a comparatively small balance at the bank, but on this occasion he had just realized an investment, and was about to place the result—six thousand pounds—in the bank, pending re-investment. He was on the point of sending off his confidential clerk with the money, when once more he saw the four-fingered hand. Now at that time Varings’ was considered to be as safe as a church. Possibly a few people with special means of information may have had some slight suspicion at the time, but my father certainly had none. He had always banked with Varings’, as his father had done before him. However, his faith in the warning hand was so great that instead of paying in the six thousand he withdrew his balance that day. Is that good enough for you?’

‘Not entirely. Mind, I don’t dispute your facts, but I doubt if it requires the supernatural to explain them. You say that the vision appears to be hereditary. Does that mean that you yourself have ever seen it?’

‘I have seen it once.’

‘When?’

‘I saw it tonight.’ Brackley spoke like a man suppressing some strong excitement. ‘It was just as you got up from the card-table after losing on your fours. I was on the point of urging you and the other two men to go on playing. I saw the hand distinctly. It seemed to be floating in the air about a couple of yards away from me. It was a small white hand, like a lady’s hand, cut short off at the wrist. For a second it moved slowly towards me, and then vanished. Nothing would have induced me to go on playing poker tonight.’

‘You are—excuse me for mentioning it—not in the least degree under the influence of drink. Further, you are by habit an almost absurdly temperate man. I mention these things because they have to be taken into consideration. They show that you were not at any rate the victim of a common and disreputable form of illusion. But what service has the hand done you? We play a regular point at the club. We are not the excited gamblers of fiction. We don’t increase the points, and we never play after one in the morning. At the moment when the hand appeared to you, how much had you won?’

‘Twenty-five pounds—an exceptionally large amount.’

‘Very well. You’re a careful player. You play best when your luck’s worst. We stopped play at half-past eleven. If we had gone on playing till one, and your luck had been of the worst possible description all the time, we will say that you might have lost that twenty-five and twenty-five more. To me it is inconceivable, but with the worst luck and the worst play it is perhaps possible. Now then, do you mean to tell me that the loss of twenty-five pounds is a matter of such importance to a man with your income as to require a supernatural intervention to prevent you from losing it?’

‘Of course it isn’t.’

‘Well, then, the four-fingered hand has not accomplished its mission. It has not saved you from anything. It might even have been inconvenient. If you had been playing with strangers and winning, and they had wished to go on playing, you could hardly have refused. Of course, it did not matter with us—we play with you constantly, and can have our revenge at any time. The four-fingered hand is proved in this instance to have been useless and inept. Therefore, I am inclined to believe that the appearances when it really did some good were coincidences. Doubtless your grandfather and father and yourself have seen the hand, but surely that may be due to some slight hereditary defect in the seeing apparatus, which, under certain conditions, say, of the light and of your own health creates the illusion. The four-fingered hand is natural and not supernatural, subjective and not objective.’

‘It sounds plausible,’ remarked Brackley. He got up, crossed the room, and began to open the card-table. ‘Practical tests are always the most satisfactory, and we can soon have a practical test.’ As he put the candles on the table he started a little and nearly dropped one of them. He laughed drily. ‘I saw the four-fingered hand again just then,’ he said. ‘But no matter—come—let us play.’

‘Oh, the two game isn’t funny enough.’

‘Then I’ll fetch up Blake from downstairs; you know him. He never goes to bed, and he plays the game.’

Blake, who was a youngish man, had chambers downstairs. Brackley easily persuaded him to join the party. It was decided that they should play for exactly an hour. It was a poor game; the cards ran low, and there was very little betting. At the end of the hour Brackley had lost a sovereign, and Yarrow had lost five pounds.

‘I don’t like to get up a winner, like this,’ said Blake. ‘Let’s go on.’

But Yarrow was not to be persuaded. He said that he was going off to bed. No allusion to the four-fingered hand was made in speaking in the presence of Blake, but Yarrow’s smile of conscious superiority had its meaning for Brackley. It meant that Yarrow had overthrown a superstition, and was consequently pleased with himself. After a few minutes’ chat Yarrow and Blake said good-night to Brackley, and went downstairs together.

Just as they reached the ground floor they heard, from far up the staircase, a short cry, followed a moment afterwards by the sound of a heavy fall.

‘What’s that?’ Blake exclaimed.

‘I’m just going to see,’ said Yarrow, quietly. ‘It seemed to me to come from Brackley’s rooms. Let’s go up again.’

They hurried up the staircase and knocked at Brackley’s door. There was no answer. The whole place was absolutely silent. The door was ajar; Yarrow pushed it open, and the two men went in.

The candles on the card-table were still burning. At some distance from them, in a dark corner of the room, lay Brackley, face downwards, with one arm folded under him and the other stretched wide.

Blake stood in the doorway. Yarrow went quickly over to Brackley, and turned the body partially over.

‘What is it?’ asked Blake, excitedly. ‘Is the man ill? Has he fainted?’

‘Run downstairs,’ said Yarrow, curtly. ‘Rouse the porter and get a doctor at once.’

The moment Blake had gone, Yarrow took a candle from the card-table, and by the light of it examined once more the body of the dead man. On the throat there was the imprint of a hand—a

right hand with the second finger missing. The marks, which were crimson at first, grew gradually fainter.

Some years afterwards, in Yarrow's presence, a man happened to tell some story of a warning apparition that he himself had investigated.

'And do you believe that?' Yarrow asked.

'The evidence that the apparition was seen—and seen by more than one person—seems to me fairly conclusive in this case.'

'That is all very well. I will grant you the apparition if you like. But why speak of it as a warning? If such appearances take place, it still seems to me absurd and disproportionate to suppose that they do so in order to warn us, or help us, or hinder us, or anything of the kind. They appear for their own unfathomable reasons only. If they seem to forbid one thing or command another, that also is for their own purpose. I have an experience of my own which would tend to show that.'