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Ghostly Hands

By MIRIAN ALLEN deFORD

A HOT JULY SUN beat down on the fresh green boards and polished windows of the house within which Jane

Rutledge lay dead. It lent a sickening glaze to the well-scrubbed brick pathway; it baked to a hard brown the

trim grass of the border; and it sent unwilling drops of perspiration down the worn forehead and patient cheeks of Uncle Jimmy Whitlow, as he toiled painfully up the steps of his sister's immaculate porch.

Not so much as a knock was needed to bring to the lace-curtained doorway the nervous mouth, the anxious blue eyes, and the straggling gray moustache of Jane Rutledge's husband; and without a word the two old men stepped together into the darkened hall, and thence into the parlor, where the mistress of the house lay in passive reception of her only kinsfolk and her only mourners.

There was no hint of July within that silent parlor; everything was still and spotless and cold as the dead woman's life had been. Jane Rutledge, first to begin her spring cleaning, last to finish that of the fall; Jane the cleanly; Jane the neat; Jane, who had chopped the little finger from her right hand because, said grim jest, she considered it superfluous—this was the woman who lay now in her dustless coffin, dressed in carefully hoarded black silk and jet, her smooth hair tightly braided from her white thin-lipped face, and the worried frown still between her straight gray eyebrows.

The brothers-in-law had not long to wait for the last arrivals. Hardly five minutes passed when the knocker sounded—Jane had suppressed the too noisy bell—and there strode into the room with his usual pomp and ceremony the Reverend Mr. Winifred Murgatroyde Strickland, followed by the timid rotundity of his wife, a small nervous person, who spent her life carrying a figurative incense behind the purple circumstance of her worshipful husband.

"I want everything should be the way Jane liked it," murmured Mr. Rutledge to the unresponsive broad-cloth seated beside him. "This house is so danged clean—beg pardon, Mr. Strickland, so tarnation clean—that you couldn't get it dirty if you kept a pig in it; and I didn't eat no breakfast this mornin', so that I shouldn't mess up the kitchen any. Why, dear me suz! you can see yourself in the stove, an' as for—"

But Uncle Jimmy pulled his sleeve.

"Hush up brother," he whispered with a strained throatiness. "Can't you see the parson's agoin' to pray?"

The service was short but decorous. One might have fancied a smile on the thin lips that had never said more than they had to. It was only four o'clock, and still blazing hot, when Jane's husband and Jane's brother carried Jane to the shining, decent hearse, and climbed behind the minister and his wife into the worn, black carriage with its two gaunt steeds.

As they rode through the sleepy, elm-shaded streets, clouds began to gather in the copper sky; and the stopping of the hearse at the cemetery was marked by a long thunder growl from the slaty west.

A LITTLE OLD MAN, trembling under the weight of his iron shovel, met them at the moss-grown gate. Further back, by the well-ordered grave where Jane Rutledge was to lie, stood a gawky youth, newly apprenticed to the sexton, his freckled countenance vacillating between fear and curiosity at this, his first funeral.

"G'd afte'noon, Mr. Rutledge," wheezed the old sexton; "g'd afte'noon, Mr. Whitlow; g'd afte'noon, sir; g'd after-noon, ma'am; it's a sad errand brings you here, but many's the one such I see. Mrs. Rutledge was a good woman, sir; I mind her aplayin' with her little apron on, al'ays so clean like, aroun' my stone-cuttin' place when we was all forty years younger, beggin' your pardon, ma'am; an' that reminds me that the stone is all ready, and in my little quarters here in the cimit'ry, bein' real decent like, an' readin' just 'Jane Rutledge, by her husban', an' the year—'

A quick flash of lightning cut short this protracted speech; old Mark's life had been one long sentence, and death alone would bring him to so much as a semicolon. As if warned to hasten, the funeral cortege rolled on up the broad, graveled path to the waiting grave.

As Mr. Strickland spoke the "dust to dust, ashes to ashes," a second flash of lightning just missed the tall poplar by which he stood. The accompanying thunder boomed in great sound waves about them, and the rain began to fall.

The minister threw propriety to the winds, and gabbled his remaining words en route to the carriage. His wife tumbled excitedly after him; and the husband and brother of the dead woman, after one quick look at the still open grave, turned their backs also. For a moment, the gawky boy stood by the drenched and frantic sexton; then as a film of light ran across his metal shovel, he gave one howl of terror, and fled.

With trembling fingers old Mark picked up his own shovel, and, almost overcome by terror of the deafening thunder, the heavy, clogging water, and the really frightful intensity of the lightning, summoned all his feeble powers of exertion to throw haphazard on the lowered coffin the piled-up earth around the grave. In ten minutes it was done, a huge, untidy heap, but safe until the storm was over; and the old man hobbled dizzily away into the little hut whose chief ornament at present was the decorous tombstone of Jane Rutledge.

Five o'clock struck, then six, then

seven; and still the storm continued unabated. Nearly all night old Mark sat, his face dangerously close to the rain-pelted window, and saw the drenched, disorderly pile of earth that marked the half-made grave. When at last he fell asleep, it was still to the sound of insistent rain and the clamorous answer of thunder.

By morning, the mid-summer hurricane was over, and trees and grass breathed deeply again under a vanishing blanket of mist. Old Mark, drawn with inevitable rheumatism, groaned and sputtered his way down from his bachelor shack to complete the work on Jane Rutledge's grave.

What he saw sent him reeling and gasping against the tall poplar. The two shovels lay neatly one upon the other at the roots of the tree. All signs of trampling feet had been carefully patted away. And the grave—the grave was very smooth, except that at one side there was a deep crack, and the mark of two grasping hands—

And on the right handprint on the grave the little finger was missing!