

Fred M. White

A black silhouette of a hand is cast against a background of a halftone dot pattern. The hand is positioned with fingers spread, palm facing forward. The background is a circular area of halftone dots, which is darker towards the edges, creating a vignette effect. The overall image is in black and white.

*The Shadow
of the Dead
Hand*

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The Shadow of the Dead Hand



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THE END

CHAPTER I

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Roy Kindermere pocketed Mrs. Levenson's cheque with a smile and that easy grace of his and with a few well-chosen words, put on his hat and overcoat and left the great florid house, thankful that his uncongenial task was finished. If there was one thing more than another he hated, it was this 'Man from Blankney's' business, by which he was forced to get a living. Still, what was a man to do, when he had been brought up to nothing, and had, moreover, quarrelled with the one relative in the world who could and should have made his life at least worth living.

Not that the quarrel was any of Roy's seeking; indeed, it was a wonderful exploit on his part that he had managed to keep on terms of something like amity with his eccentric uncle, the Earl of Kindale. For Kindale was, to all practical purposes, a miser, a man who lived in one corner of his magnificent town house, waited upon by a single servant, and in the habit of taking his frugal meals at his club, where he spoke to nobody, and, on the other hand, nobody noticed him. For the rest, he was a cross-grained old gentleman, without a single drop of the milk of human kindness in his veins.

Some day or another all his wealth and all his property would go to Roy, for the simple reason that the old man could not leave it to anybody else. And, meanwhile, he cared little whether his next-of-kin lived or died, and so it came about that, after the war, the Honourable Roy Kindermere was thrown entirely on his own resources.

They led him eventually into the service of a big co-operative store, where he acted as a sort of commercial traveller. And then, by gradual degrees, he found himself in touch with the new rich, who liked his manners and irreproachable appearance, but that was not until Mrs. Leverson came along with her ostentation and her vulgar wealth, and made the tentative suggestion that Roy should attend one of her dinner parties, ostensibly at a guest.

What she really wanted was for her friends to read in the Press that amongst the dinner guests was the Honourable Roy Kindermere, the heir of the Earl of Kindale, and she was quite prepared to pay a handsome sum for the privilege. And Roy, needing money badly, and, moreover, the fortunate possessor of a keen sense of humour, fell in with the scheme readily enough.

But, thank goodness, that was done with—at any rate, for the present. It was getting late as he strolled along the West End streets in the direction of his humble lodgings until he came at length to Marrion-square. That exclusive locality was dark enough save for one house, where, apparently, some sort of festivity was in progress. Roy could hear the strains of a band and catch sight through an open window of a number of figures moving to the harmony of the music. He paused just for a moment to glance in with a certain fugitive curiosity, and then, just as he was moving on again, he caught the glimpse of a white arm upraised and, a second later, almost at his feet, fell a small bunch of flowers. It was almost as if some one was signalling to him.

He would have passed on, but something impelled him to pick up the blooms and look at them under the light of a

street lamp. As he did so, a scrap of paper fluttered to his feet. This he picked up and read a pencil message as follows:—

"Help me from this house. Or take this to the police. I am desperate. Blue Twin Star."

It was very amazing, very extraordinary, to come across an adventure like this in the very heart of the West End, and in such dramatic circumstances. It seemed hard to connect a great house like this with crime or mystery.

Not that Roy hesitated, because here was an adventure after his own heart. He had all the dash and audacity, and that peculiar sense of humour which goes with his class. Moreover, the suggestion of beauty in distress appealed strongly to his manhood. He would go into the house and investigate for himself. If he were thrown out, then it would be easy to say that he had made a mistake, and, after that, he could trust to his personal appearance and his own name to save him from the mess.

He walked quietly up the steps and pushed open the front door, which was not fastened. Inside stood a solemn figure in black whom he rightly took to be a sort of major domo, and three or four footmen in splendid livery. There were no signs of either host or hostess, for which Roy was grateful. With a fine air he stripped off his silk-lined overcoat and handed it to one of the footmen; then, with all the sang froid in the world, he walked into the double dining-room where the dance was taking place.

Still there was no sign of any hostess, so that Roy could mingle with the guests and look around him. Then it seemed to him that a minute or two sufficed to show him the lady in

distress who had summoned him so mysteriously. Yes, that was the girl.

She stood a little apart from the rest in a corner, a tall slim figure in a blue dress with a sort of diamond ornament in her hair which consisted of a pair of stones. No doubt the twin stars of the message. A beautiful girl, exquisitely fair, with eyes that matched her dress and an unconscious look of pleading in those amazing eyes of hers; and a sort of vivid anticipation, as if she were expecting something to happen.

"By Jove!" Roy murmured under his breath. "By Jove!"

Without hesitating another moment he crossed the room, threading his way decorously between the dancers until he came face to face with the lady of the blue eyes. He smiled slightly.

"Was that your message?" he whispered.

"Yes," she said. "And you found it?"

"Of course, or I should not be here. Please smile at me. Look at me as if we we're old friends. Yes, that's better. Now, where can we go and talk? Somewhere quiet."

The girl lightly laid her hand upon his arm, as if they were going to slide into the dance, then gradually piloted him through a door at the back into a sort of conservatory, which obviously led into the garden at the rear of the house.

"Ah, this will do capitally," Roy said. "Now, to begin with, my name is Roy Kindermere."

"Oh, really?" the girl said. "I have often heard my father mention you. Aren't you the nephew of that dreadful—"

"Yes, that's the man," Roy smiled. "Old Kindale. But never mind about that. What shall I call you?"

"My name," the girl said, "is Alcie Glynn. I don't suppose you have ever heard of me."

Roy murmured something appropriate, but, as a matter of fact, he had heard the name before. Moreover, he knew that this was the only child of a certain Rupert Glynn, a man of good family, and who at one time had been a welcome guest in most of the best houses in the land. But that was before he had fallen away from grace and had to resign his commission in the Red Guards in connection with some unsavoury card scandal. From that point on he had disappeared from Mayfair, and most of those who knew all about the underworld were fully cognisant of the fact that he was now known, or had been known, as one of the most expert card sharpers in Europe. The sort of man who follows fashion; in Paris one day, at Monte Carlo the next, and Cairo the day after. Anywhere young fools with money were to be found, and a polished man of the world could reap his harvest. But it was not for Roy to mention this, all the more as he understood that Glynn had died not so very long before.

"Does it very much matter?" Roy asked. "I have met scores of Glynn's in my time. But tell me what does this mean? Am I to understand that a lady like yourself, evidently brought up to mix with people of our class, is actually detained in a great West End house as if she were a prisoner?"

"Yes, it does seem rather amazing," the girl smiled rather sadly. "But, all the same, it's true. Do you know Mr. Kindermere, that I practically possess no outdoor clothing to speak of. When my poor father died not so long ago on the

Riviera he left me a note saying that I was to come here and see Mr. Murdstone."

"And who the dickens is Mr. Murdstone?"

"Why, the owner of this house, of course. He and my father were very friendly. Yet I never liked him. There is something horribly repulsive about the man. He seems to be rich, and, at any rate, there is no lack of money, but, all the same, this is little better than a gambling hall. Young men, yes, and young society women, come here night after night and play roulette and those sort of games for immense sums. And I have been forced to act as a kind of hostess. Oh, it's horrible."

Roy shut his teeth with a snap. He was beginning to understand. This beautiful girl was nothing but a lure to attract rich youth to the house. His blood boiled at the thought.

"Oh, that's the game, is it?" he murmured. "But what's going on to-night? What's the object of this dance?"

"Oh, there is no gambling this evening," the girl said. "Mr. Murdstone let the house for to-day to a certain Countess Visconti, whose daughter was married this morning. And this is part of the wedding festivities. You can imagine what a dreadful day it has been for me. This is why I got desperate, and threw that little note out of the window, hoping that somebody like you would find it."

Roy listened to all this, more or less bewildered. It seemed to him almost impossible that this sort of thing should be carried on almost openly, almost under the eyes of the police, in the midst of the West End, and in so fashionable a locality as Marrion-square. But he did not want

to dwell upon that for the moment. He thoroughly believed every word that fell from the girl's lips, and it would be no fault of his if she were not in some safe haven before daylight. And already a half-formed plan had shaped itself in his mind.

"Now, look here," he began. "If you—"

He had no time to finish what he was saying, because of a sudden eruption in the shape of a young man, who lounged coolly into the conservatory and surveyed the two through his monocle.

"By gad," he drawled. "It's Roy Kindermere."

CHAPTER II

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The new-comer seemed to be perfectly at home. There was an idiotic smile on his face, which was round and chubby, and his yellow curly hair gave him the air of an overgrown cherub. There were people who declared that Peter Lantary had been born without brains, and that it was a marvel how he, the son of a poor country gentleman, ever contrived to make a living. And yet he had his chambers in the Albany, and his manservant and his West End tailor, and he owed nobody. Moreover, he was to be seen wherever society gathered together, ruffling it with the best of them. He was popular too, in his way, despite his reputation of silly ass, and was acclaimed rightly as one of the best amateur comedians in the kingdom.

"Now, what on earth are you doing here, Roy?" he asked.

"If it comes to that, what are you doing here?" Kindermere countered. "This is not the sort of house where I should have expected to meet you. Miss Glynn, I hope you won't mind my speaking fairly candidly before my friend, Mr. Lantary. He is an old schoolfellow of mine, and, I think he may be able to help us."

"I am quite sure I can," Lantary drawled coolly. "You may be dashed surprised to hear, my dear young lady, that I have a pretty shrewd idea as to what you are doing here. And I have a more than shrewd idea as to the activities of your remarkable host. But what I want to know, for the moment, is what Roy is doing here. You weren't invited, old bean, were you?"

"Good lord, no," Roy exclaimed.

"Ah, I thought not. I was certain of that when I saw you come into the dance room. You might put me wise, old thing."

Without knowing exactly why, Kindermere proceeded to do so. Lantary was a great ass, of course, but then he had all the pluck and courage of his race, and Roy knew that he could depend upon him when the emergency arose, as it might do at any moment. Without waiting to be asked, Lantary threw himself into a seat and coolly proceeded to light a cigarette.

"Now, look here, children," he said. "This is just where little Peter Pan comes in. I don't want it generally known, and it ain't, but, you see, I have got my living to get, the same as the other poor beggars who went out under the mistaken impression that they were going to make England fit for heroes to live in. And, on the whole, I haven't done too very badly."

"So I have always imagined," Kindermere said drily. "How do you manage on nothing a year, Peter?"

Lantary eyed the speaker solemnly through his monocle.

"I am a private inquiry agent," he said. "Don't laugh. Without vanity, dear things, I am not quite such a fool as I look. And my chubby face and this monocle, that worries the life out of me, make jolly fine assets, don't you know. Why, people look upon me as next door to an idiot, by Jove. It doesn't matter what you say before Peter Lantary. Such a harmless ass! By gad, I am quite a new sort of detective. And who would think it to look at me? But I have done some pretty shrewd things, old bean, and I don't mind telling you

that I am here tonight on business. All the criminals of the world don't live down in the East End of London—heaps of them knocking about in Rolls Royce cars, and those are the sort of birds I'm gunning for. That is why I got an invitation here to-night. But I am in no hurry, and when I spotted the fact that you had shoved yourself in this revue, Roy, I looked you up to see what the little game was."

"Well, now you know," Kindermere smiled. "And, since you are acquainted with the new underworld, perhaps you can give me a point or two as to the character of my involuntary host."

"Oh, I could write a whole book about that," Lantary replied. "And perhaps some day I shall. Very hot stuff, is our friend Felix Murdstone. But never mind him for the moment. What are you going to do with regard to Miss Glynn?"

"Well, upon my word. I hardly know," Roy said. "I have told you exactly how she is situated since the death of her father, whom you might have known—"

Lantary winked solemnly at the speaker, and Roy knew that he had no occasion to dilate further on that side of the story.

"Now, what can we do?" Roy went on.

"We can't leave Miss Glynn here. It seems monstrous to think it possible that a girl should be, to all intents and purposes, a prisoner here in the West End. Neither can I believe that her father would have known what was going to happen when he invited her to come here."

"Oh, I am sure he didn't," Alcie said almost tearfully. "I know that my father did not get on with the majority of people, and I suppose that is why so many of his

acquaintances avoided him. But he was a real good father to me, and there was nothing he would not have done for my happiness. I came here quite cheerfully and willingly, because my father wished it, and I am certain that there is some reason why I have been so strangely treated—"

"Well, at any rate, you can't stay here any longer," Roy said impatiently. "Your friends and relations—"

"But I don't think I have any," the girl said helplessly. "My father never mentioned them. Whenever I spoke of his people, or my mother's, he always told me that I was not to allude to the subject. There was some quarrel, I think."

Roy listened to all this uneasily. He and Lantary, for the matter of that, knew perfectly well why the late Rupert Glynn never mentioned his relations. They had cast him off long ago. And, as to relatives on her mother's side, conditions had been just as hard and bitter. But to mention such a thing and to disclose a state of affairs of which the girl was absolutely ignorant would have been something like refined cruelty at that moment.

"Well, I suppose we must think out something," Roy said. "But how are you going to manage with regard to your wardrobe? I could smuggle you out of the house easily enough, but you can't walk about London in a blue ball dress and a couple of diamond stars. You see the difficulty? I suppose you have no maid?"

"I never had such a thing in my life," Alcie smiled.

"Then you couldn't go upstairs and pack your boxes and bring them down. But, by the way, where is Mr. Murdstone? And who is hostess on this auspicious occasion?"

"I can answer that," Lantary said. "The hostess, whose daughter was married this morning, is a bit of a mystery, like so many people nowadays. She has a flat in town, and a house down in the country where she entertains all sorts of queer people. I don't mean anarchists and that kind of thing, but the shy, foreign type who are supposed to be European capitalists and high financiers. And, by the way, Murdstone poses as being one of that lot. He is supposed to have made an immense fortune somewhere out in the wild and woolly West in connection with oil, or cattle, or bits of timber."

"Is he in the house?" Roy asked.

"Yes, he is," Lantary explained. "But this sort of thing is rather out of his line, so he contents himself with lending the house for the occasion, and, after showing up for an hour or so, he went into the library, for I was chatting with him just before you came in. I had my own reasons for wanting a little pi-jaw with him, but he wouldn't let me stay long. I could almost hear him saying to himself, 'Why does this putrid little ass with the eyeglass want to worry me like this?' With any luck, later on, he will know. But it's a jolly long row I've got to hoe first. But haven't we got something else to think of?"

"Oh, I haven't forgotten Miss Glynn," Roy said. "I only wanted to know if the coast was fairly clear so far as Murdstone was concerned. If he is well out of the way, it makes things easier."

"Well, I don't think you will be troubled with him, not for the next hour or two, at any rate. By Jove, this is an extraordinary adventure, isn't it? I wouldn't have missed it for worlds. Still, there is a practical side to it—"

"Yes, and we have got to solve it," Roy pointed out. "Get Miss Glynn away safely and put her under the protection of some one who will understand and look after her sympathetically. I suppose it couldn't do to go straight to Murdstone—"

"Wash it out, dear boy, wash it out," Lantary drawled. "You might just as well grab a cobra by the tail as come between Murdstone and his schemes. He's a man hunter, old cockins, I mean a man eater. And that's the only name for him. But I tell you what I can do. I can go and blather to the blighter and keep him talking in the library whilst you make your getaway. You smother Miss Glynn into a cloak and go through that door, where you will find yourself in the garden. Down at the far end is another door leading into the lane behind. At the corner of the street you can pick up a taxi. Oh, I know all about it. I have been studying the geography of this house for over a fortnight. So long."

With that, Lantary lounged out of the conservatory, leaving Roy and Alcie alone to their solitude.

"I think, on the whole, that Lantary's scheme is about the only one that is practical," Roy said. "And I am glad to have him with us. At any rate, he can keep the coast clear. Then I can take you to a flat not very far off, where I have a most kindly disposed but particularly eccentric old aunt, who will simply love to look after you when she has heard your story. As to your general wardrobe, you can send for that afterwards. What do you think?"

It was settled at length, after some natural reluctance on Alcie's part. Then Roy rose to regain his coat and hat. He was hardly back in the little alcove before Lantary crept to

the room. There was nothing about him to betray the least perturbation or excitement, save that his hand shook a little.

"Looks to me, dear children," he said, "as if the problem had solved itself. Our friend, the man eater, is dead."

"Dead!" Alcie cried. "Dead?"

"Yes, dead, beyond the shadow of a doubt," Lantary murmured. "He is lying there, in the library, on the flat of his back with his face turned to the ceiling."

"You don't mean to say—" Roy began.

"Yes," Lantary said. "Murdered. No doubt of that."