

The Hands of Esau

Beatrice Redpath

Illustrated by

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A Story Showing the Power of a Tragic Past

THE HANDS OF ESAU

By BEATRICE REDPATH

ILLUSTRATED BY P. C. SHEPPARD



Mavis noticed how Rodney Tennant paused on the threshold, regarding her quizzically, while frowning upon the black severity of her widow's attire.

"I had forgotten that was necessary," he said, as he came forward into the room. And then as he faced her across the width of fireplace his tone expressed all his pent up impatience. "Must we give up a year, a whole year, Mavis, to the mere task of forgetting him?"

"A year, Rodney?" Mavis repeated, her head resting against the rose-colored back of her chair, "but can one forget in that time?"

She turned grave eyes upon him and felt a suddenly achieved balance in his mere physical presence, a balance which she had sorely lacked of late. The sudden and welcome release had come attended by crowding memories of the dead man, memories which tormented and with which she became obsessed. She had struggled hard to forget, she had striven to obliterate from her mind all thought of Wyndham Andrews. But she had not succeeded. Even now she pressed her fingers down upon her eyelids to shut out the hateful vision of his face, which rose so constantly before her.

"Oh," she exclaimed, from the depth of a profound weariness, "sometimes I feel as though I could never forget, as though he had left his imprint on me forever, as though his memory would coil up in my mind like a serpent, ready to spring, ready to bury its fangs and poison all that is pleasant."

She paused, shuddering at the impression created by her own words, till Rodney's voice came, dominating and reassuring.

“I will show you how to forget,” he said with great gentleness, “I will give you other things to remember.”

His voice seemed to imbue her with a fresh courage. He would teach her how to forget. Mavis lifted her eyes to send a flash of gratitude across the intervening firelit space.

“You’ve given me so much already,” she said gratefully, “and yet still I can’t forget, Rodney,” and she leaned one elbow on her knee and sought for reassurance in his face. “Can one live six such years and yet come through unscathed? It seems to me, sometimes, that no matter what you may put into my life, those years with Wyndham will always be there, a dark morass in the back of my mind.”

Rodney Tennant gave a glance about the long room, so pleasant with its atmosphere of comfortable living, and then looked back to Mavis’s face, to the blue shadows beneath her eyes, full evidence of the strain which she had been undergoing.

“This place,” he said emphatically, “is horrible for you. It’s simply haunted by memories. You must get away from here at once. You must not allow your mind to dwell on what is past. Wyndham Andrews is dead and all the evil he brought into your life is dead with him. You must forget, Mavis, you must forget. Such as Wyndham Andrews was are not meant to be remembered.”

It was as simple as that to Rodney. Mavis almost smiled at his simple and easy adjustment of her mental attitude. She must forget. She was only too willing to forget. Rodney had no conception of how she had striven to this purpose. A man like Rodney, practical and without imagination, could not understand the vagaries of her brain. And she did not want him to understand. She would defeat this thing herself, these memories which threatened to rob her of the present. But she must have a little time, just a little time in which to do so.

“Memory,” she said slowly, her eyes drawn to a flaming log in the fireplace, “is so beyond one’s control. It creeps to one’s side at night, a hood over its head, and suddenly stands out in all its stark horror.” She paused, and then with an involuntary shudder went on in a stifled tone. “Things come and cry to me in the night. . . . creatures he has injured. . . . their faces come to me out of the darkness tears in their eyes a curse for him on their lips!”

“Mavis!” Rodney Tennant rose quickly and took both her hands in his, forcing her to lift her face. “You are not to talk nor think in this way. Wyndham Andrews is dead . . . forever! And now you are to begin life all over again. You are going to forget him. Promise me that you will never speak in this way again. It is bad for you, Mavis, terribly bad. Besides, we have other things to think of, haven’t we?”

Mavis nodded as Rodney released her hands with a firm pressure. Her glance rested upon a shaft of sunlight which had pierced through the half-closed blinds and lay like a broad bright ribbon across the floor. It was as though some of the golden miracle of that Autumn day was creeping inside, tentatively, with small shafts and tender stealings, touching the gilt of frames, lighting up the backs of bindings, picking out the high lights upon a bit of brass or rich colored pottery, dispelling the gloom which had hung over the house for so long; even to that upper chamber where the dead had lain. The house was to be swept and garnished, swept clear of all hateful memories, garnished with a sweet cleanliness of living.

Mavis continued sitting beside the fire for some time after Rodney had left, watching the slow consuming flames eating into the logs, while her thoughts recurred to the visit she had received from her lawyer earlier in the afternoon. She had not spoken of this to Rodney. She had omitted to tell him that Wyndham had left his entire fortune to her, for her inclination was to refuse the money. She wanted nothing which should come to her through Wyndham Andrews. Only her insight was beginning to tell her that were she to do so, some day, as Rodney Tennant’s wife, she might feel that she had robbed him of what might have been his. Was it quite fair to him? That was the question she must answer for herself. Rodney, in his lifetime had had so little. If she put aside her own personal feelings she could give him so much. And that was her desire, just to give, to give all she had and was to the man she loved.

It puzzled her that Wyndham should have left everything to her, so unconditionally. That was not like Wyndham. He could not have been ignorant of just how largely Rodney had figured in her life. Moreover he could not have failed to draw the conclusion that if the opportunity ever occurred she would marry him.

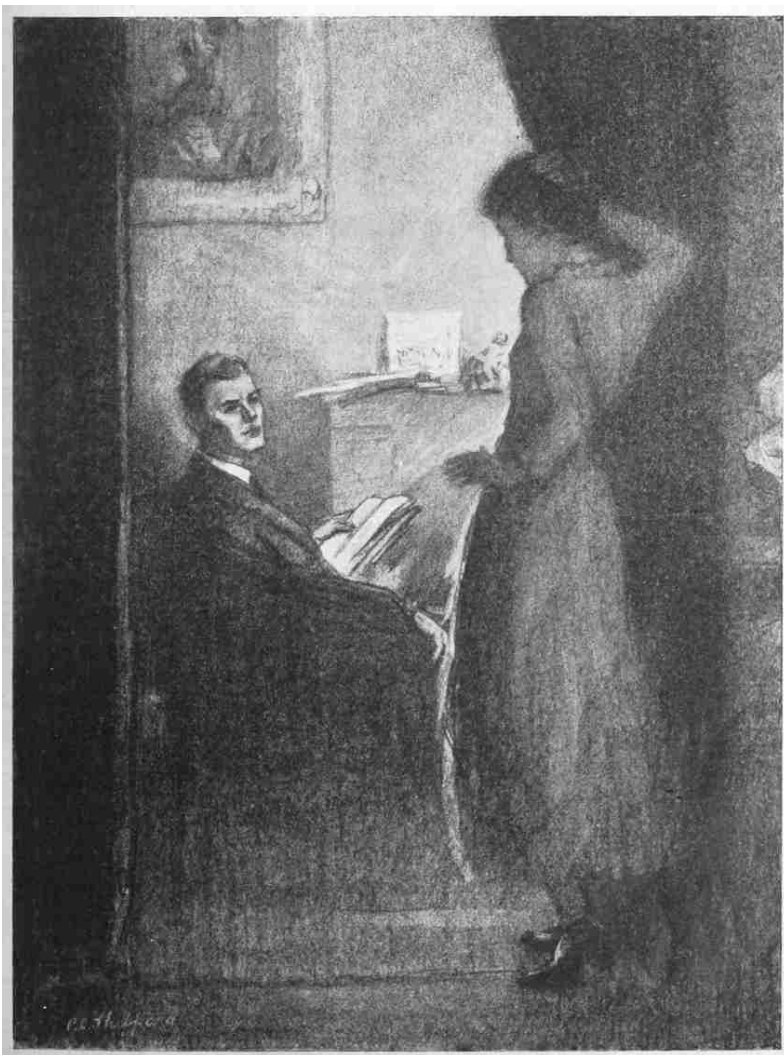
For the fact that Rodney Tennant had been the pillar to which she had turned in the complete wreck of her life was common property. She knew the public wonder why she had not long ago taken her fate into her own hands. She also was quite aware of the mercenary motives attributed to her

having not done so. But those who ascribed such considerations had discounted her Puritan ancestry, the adamantine streak which had kept her clear of the mire through which Wyndham had dragged her. She could not have been unfaithful to a vow taken, even to so poor a recipient as Wyndham Andrews. If fate had not cut short her marriage, she herself would have had no hand in the breaking of it.

But at any rate, one way or the other, the money was only a zero in the complete sum of her happiness. To be able to call her hours her own, to be rid forever of hate which had darkened the sun, to be joyous and unburdened, this was the miracle! Life was undarkened, unflawed, except by memory, and memory could be obliterated, washed clean as a slate. This was her present and sufficient purpose. To banish forever from her mind all thought or recollection of that which was past.

Mavis had been married to Rodney Tennant for some months, and these had been quite all that she could have wished. The long period of waiting upon which she had insisted, had not in this case blurred the reality, as so often happens when the reality grows frayed by too constant dreaming. No, it had been in every sense quite all that her imagination could have pictured it. There had been no flaw which she could discover in her union with Rodney Tennant.

She was pondering upon the extent of her happiness one evening, as she wandered slowly about the garden. A harvest moon was rising behind the house, like a yellow coin flung up in the sky, accentuating the black masses of masonry from which points of light escaped between closed shutters. Even the surroundings had not flawed the whole. For the greater part of a year after Wyndham's death she had travelled, and then on her return the impossibility of finding a purchaser for the house had presented itself. She and Rodney had at first viewed the advisability of living where she had been so unhappy with some misgivings, but she had trampled down her distaste and brought her good sense to bear on the situation. No, life had no flaw which she could discover, was her thought as she wandered about in the delicately perfumed dusk of the garden.



She had left Rodney sitting in the library with a book.

She had left Rodney sitting in the library with a book. She was too much self-centred these days, too much absorbed in her own personal happiness to feel any interest in spelling out the lives of others in the novel she had just thrown aside. Her happiness filled her with a supreme power to love and live. From the depths out of which she had come it made it appear as though she were now upon the very pinnacle of the summit of life, where nothing could touch her, where she was unassailable.

She paused, just outside the library, with a sudden impulse to look in at Rodney through the interlacing leaves which shrouded the panes. She

stepped into the long grass growing beside the brushes and put up her hands to push aside the leaves of the hawthorn bush. The light from inside flowed over her face and shoulders with a white glare. Suddenly her face became transfixed with a strange terror, an utter bewilderment of horror which made her eyes round and glazed as those of a doll. For the man seated in the chair with the book in his hands was to all appearances Wyndham Andrews!

She gave a strangled, choking cry, and then she heard her own voice raised, shrill, uncontrolled. "Rodney Rodney!"

Immediately she saw the absurdity of her illusion. Rodney jumped to his feet and crossed the room, looking anxiously down into her frightened face, framed in the thick foliage.

"What is it?" he asked hastily, "whatever is the matter, dear? Did you hurt yourself?"

"No, no, how foolish of me!" Mavis responded, ashamed and embarrassed. "It was nothing but a horrible fancy which swept over me," and she put up her hands to her eyes, pressing the fingers down tightly upon the closed lids. And then she dropped her hands and looked up at him keenly, while she inquired with an assumed carelessness.

"Rodney, why do you smoke cigars? I've never seen you smoke anything but cigarettes before?"

Rodney was still regarding her with a puzzled frown.

"I don't know, dear. I suppose I'm developing expensive tastes. You don't object to cigars, do you?"

Mavis shook her head slowly while she looked away into the shadowy garden.

"No, of course not," she said slipping her fingers into Rodney's hand. "It is only, my dear," and she turned grave eyes back to his face, "it is only that I hate to see you do anything he did."

Rodney pressed her fingers affectionately, and threw his unfinished cigar down upon the grass. She felt grateful to him that he had not laughed at what she had said.

"I didn't know," he said, taking a cigarette from his case and lighting it. "There, is that better?" and he smiled down upon her intense seriousness. "How extraordinarily sensitive and imaginative you are, dear!"

Imaginative! Yes, Mavis supposed that was all it was. Her mind kept too long the impressions of things pleasant or unpleasant. She allowed her imagination to work upon them, to build up strange fancies and ideas. How difficult it had been for her to efface the past! Had she not even succeeded yet in completely doing so? She had been so sure that she had forgotten, that her mind had been freed of the imprint of Wyndham's personality, but here it was in a new guise, and a peculiarly horrible one.

The idea kept recurring to her. This grotesque fancy then was to persist, was to encroach unbearably upon her happiness. She found herself watching Rodney continually, seeking to discover what it was that was actually beginning to make her see a strange resemblance to the dead man growing up in him.

He was becoming stouter, his clothes were different, he was assuming the sleek, groomed appearance of Wyndham Andrews. She knew there was sufficient reason for this. His clothes were better made, better cared for, and he was no longer worried by business affairs. But to her mind the resemblance was gaining greater proportions than these things alone could signify. And she watched him with a growing fear in her eyes lest she should see other things, other resemblances from which she would shrink the more.

It was beginning to form invisible barriers between them. She would meet his eyes and look swiftly away with a tinge of embarrassment in her own lest he should read there her fears. How could she possibly tell him, how could she even suggest to him, that to her, his personality was becoming merged with that of the man whom she had loathed? No, she must kill, she must destroy this monstrous idea, before it gained too great headway upon her, before it took entire possession of her mind.

Rodney had commenced to play golf and to ride, and Mavis listened to him discuss a play at golf or the points of his horse, as she had once listened to Wyndham speak on the same subjects. She bought books which at one time would have interested him intensely, placing them about the house conspicuously, but he barely glanced at them.

"You never read any more?" she remarked to him one day.

She noticed how his manner stiffened immediately as though he perceived criticism in her tone. It made her realize more fully than she had yet done, the strained atmosphere which was growing up between them.

"It used to be all the amusement I could afford," he replied, and then with his eyes narrowing until they had become quite hard, "I wonder why it

is that you always seem to object to anything I do these days. Is it," he hesitated a moment, glancing sharply at her face, "is it because you think I am spending your money on my amusements?"

Mavis's cheeks grew hot and tears sprang into her eyes. At one time he could not have said such a thing to her. It was the fashion in which Wyndham had so often spoken to her in the past, the same intonation, the same cold cutting speech. And yet . . . and her reason granted him some excuse for his words . . . what must Rodney think when she so constantly appeared to dislike these new ways which he had adopted?

"You know it is not so," she said, her voice very low, "I never said that I did not like you to play golf."

"It wasn't very necessary for you to say so," he retorted, turning coldly away.

Then it was that Mavis made up her mind that she would not show the slightest aversion to whatever he did. If she could not banish it from her mind she would at least endeavor to hide from him any trace of it. For he could never understand. All the meaning he would take from it would be that now she felt towards him as she had once felt towards Wyndham. His matter-of-fact mind would not be able to comprehend anything so shadowy and so unreal.

Each day brought to her somehow, in one way or other, that strange sensation, that, with averted eyes she was watching Wyndham Andrews. It was no longer as though Rodney Tennant sat opposite to her at the table, to whom she talked, with that self inflicted restraint, for whose comings and goings she daily more fearfully watched. She found herself letting her book slip into her lap, while she sat seeking to discover the reason for that strange resemblance, as he sat under the lamp at the desk, or as he stood looking out of the window, his back to the room.

Sometimes when he touched her she shrank back quickly, feeling upon her shoulder the very touch of the dead man. And she remembered how she had once said that the memory of Wyndham Andrews would coil up in her mind like a serpent, ready to spring, ready to poison all that was pleasant.

She had gone up early to her room one evening, feeling unable to sit in the same room with Rodney, where the atmosphere seemed so impregnated with unspoken words. She felt as though storm clouds were pressing down upon her, thick and stifling, smothering her with their weight. She leant far

out of her window, glad of the freshness of the damp night air, so filled with the scents of the garden, muffled perfumes which broke one upon another, drowning each other's scent. Mavis clasped her hands upon the sill and stared out into the purple darkness, fretted by starlight. She felt within her the weight of something intolerable, something heavy laid across her heart. What would be the outcome of this fancy which was making such a mockery of her happiness?

She did not hear the door open behind her, but she heard a step sound in the room. She got quickly to her feet to find herself held close in Rodney's arms. He was looking down into her face with love in his eyes while he pressed his lips upon hers.

She stood passive for an instant, and then, hideously, she felt that the arms of Wyndham Andrews were around her, that his were the lips which were laid upon hers. The old shuddering repulsion which she had always felt for Wyndham swept through her body. She opened her eyes and in the dim moonlit room she could just see the back of Rodney's neck as he bent over her. The impression gained upon her, sweeping away the last vestige of her self control. With a cry she struggled from him, pushing him aside with her hands, tearing herself loose from his arms, her head down, fear and horror choking her.

In the centre of the room she stopped, her breath came quickly, and she stared at him, darkly outlined against the open window.

"So you hate me," he said quietly.

The illusion vanished with his words and her mind cleared, her heart opened and tears rushed to her eyes as a great surge of love swept through her, of love for Rodney Tennant.

"No no," she said, her voice low and tense. Her arms reached out to him across the space which separated them, but he turned aside. Her arms dropped.

"I love you, Rodney," she whispered, but he laughed as he exclaimed mockingly:

"Love me you? It looks like it."

"Yes, I love you," Mavis repeated, her head high, trying to pierce the shadows and see his face.

She hated the laugh with which he responded. It was cruel and hard.

“Why aren’t you honest?” he asked briefly, “why do you lie? Are you lying to yourself as well as to me? You hate me, Mavis. Why don’t you say so? You hate me just as before you hated Wyndham Andrews.”

“No no! Oh, I will tell you I will explain,” Mavis cried, eager now to tell him, eager to make him understand if she could. She must try to do so. She must make every effort. “I will tell you,” she said desperately, and then her voice fell to a half choked sob. “Oh, Rodney dear I love you Rodney listen I love you you must understand what I tell you you must try to understand.”

But he went to the door and opening it said coldly:

“There is nothing to understand. You are going to invent some reason for your physical aversion to me. I don’t think I want to hear it.”

The door closed quietly behind him while Mavis stood for a moment looking into the darkness surrounding her, despair in her heart, an awful despair which she could not combat. It was fighting against shadows, nothing tangible to lay her hands upon, nothing solid to thrust aside. It was all shadows surrounding her, shadows and darkness on all sides. With sobs choking her Mavis turned back to the empty window.

The following morning when Mavis came down Rodney had already left the house. She had lain awake all night battling with the complex forces of her mind which she could not subdue nor conquer. It was impossible for things to continue as they were after last night. Matters had reached a crisis between them. Yet Rodney had said that he would not listen to her explanations. She knew that he would immediately dismiss any effort on her part to make him understand. And would an explanation help matters? She could not actually think so. It would not eradicate the impression which was growing each day more firmly fixed in her mind.

She wandered restlessly through the rooms during the entire day, seeking for some assuagement of this thing, some way in which she could kill this obsession which was ruining her happiness. If she could only persuade Rodney to sell the house, to give up everything which had belonged to Wyndham, in that way she felt that she might escape from it. But he would not do so. Already she had offered the suggestion that they should sell the house, this time perhaps being successful in finding a purchaser, but he had definitely refused.

“It suits us, doesn’t it?” he had responded in the cold tone he now inevitably used when speaking to her, “I can’t see any purpose in selling it.”

Oh, if only he would be satisfied to do as she wished. There were so many spots on the earth’s surface where they could be happy in conditions of their own making. Here the very air seemed tainted, seemed permeated with memories of the dead man. It would require something radical, some explicit change in the mode of her life to uproot it all, to wipe away her impressions. She could never obliterate them as long as she lived here.

She paused finally in her restless pacing about the rooms to pick up a book. Such thoughts as these did not advance her any further. It were better to seek distraction, to seek to occupy her mind with other things. As she turned the pages listlessly, looking for some sentence which might gain and hold her attention, a paper slipped from between the leaves and fluttered to the floor. She stooped mechanically to pick it up and instantly recoiled as the writing flashed before her eyes. Wyndham’s writing! These constant reminders! There was never any escape from them. She glanced at the few lines, carelessly scrawled across the page, and then suddenly grew rigid with amazement, her eyes riveted to the sheet of paper. It was apparently a last will of Wyndham’s, written the very day he died, and it left everything of which he died possessed, to charity, should she marry again.

She held it tightly in her hand while thoughts flashed in a swift current through her mind. Here was the response to her need. This was what she would have expected Wyndham to have done. It seemed like a direct answer to her problem and then like a horrid flash out of a clearing sky the thought if Rodney had really become as Wyndham he would tell her to destroy it.

Her hand clenched upon the paper and she got up out of her chair and commenced walking up and down the long room, while her mind groped with this new complexity. She stepped into great golden spaces of sunlight, crossed the soft rugs which were as yellow moss beneath her feet, into the shadow and back again, the paper held fast in her hand. Her eyes narrowed as she contemplated the possible outcome.

Suppose she were to take it directly to a lawyer? That way she would insure against its being destroyed. She started quickly across the room, spurred by that thought into instant action, and then stopped half way. If she were to do this, she were indeed treating Rodney as though he were as Wyndham. She was giving him no benefit of the doubt. If instead she were to show it to Rodney and he himself should suggest taking it to a lawyer,

would not that kill forever the idea of any similarity between the two men? For that would be the one thing which Wyndham never would have done. He would have destroyed instantly anything which stood in the way of his own comfort.

Her fears set her to walking up and down the length of the room. The light gradually faded from the rugs as the sun left the sky, and gray shadows effaced the corners of the room. A log fell occasionally on the hearth, where the fire was burning low, with a sputter of sparks which for an instant illumined Mavis's face with its set expression. And still she walked up and down, nervously, her feet soundless except when her heels struck between the rugs on the polished floor. Her face became more determined in its expression as the dusk deepened. She had made up her mind. She must put Rodney to the test . . . she must show him the paper when he came in.

It was almost completely dark before she heard his step in the hall. Her heart beat suffocatingly as she paused, staring towards the curtained doorway, while the paper crackled in her nervous fingers. She was trembling as she stood waiting for him to come in, but his step went past the door on his way upstairs. She recalled that there was no light in the room, and she switched on a small table lamp and called to him. She recognized her own great agitation by the tremor in her voice.

He turned back and stood outlined between the curtains, the light from the hall shining at his back. She felt a swift clutch at her heart, a moment's terror. He looked so like that other as he stood there looking into the room.

“Did you call me, Mavis?” he asked perfunctorily.

“Yes, I have something to show you, something I have just found.”

He came forward into the room and Mavis extended the sheet of paper without a word. And then she turned away. She could not bear to see his face, she was too terribly afraid.

The silence in the room seemed to endure while centuries rolled past. She listened to the ticking of the clock, the sound of far off noises, of a door slamming downstairs, a log falling in the grate, and still he did not speak. She clasped her hands together till the nails bit into her flesh. If only he would speak and put an end to her suspense. She turned slowly about unable longer to endure the weight of silence and met his eyes, level and keen, regarding her fixedly.

“I’m afraid you’ve made a bad bargain, Mavis,” he said, and his voice was surprisedly matter-of-fact. “I’m terribly sorry about this for I see how you feel. For myself it is rather a relief . . . it’s not altogether to one’s liking to step into a dead man’s shoes. But I wasn’t worth the price, Mavis . . . you had found that out . . . even before this happened.”

The voice was the voice of Rodney Tennant. Swiftly Mavis came towards him, and this time, held by the transfiguration of her face, he did not elude her. He listened to her gravely as she told him, hesitatingly at first, and gradually conveying to him the full horror of what she had suffered mentally through her strange obsession.

“It’s been all my fault,” he said, “I should never have allowed you to live here . . . I should have known that here you could never forget. Every room must hold for you some reminder, some imprint of the past. But you will forget. Mavis. . .” his voice rang through the room with a firm energy and defiance, while Mavis crept closer into his arms with a great and strong belief in his words. . . . “This time, Wyndham Andrews is dead . . . is dead forever.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Hands of Esau* by Beatrice Redpath]