

‘A rare and beautiful hand’: collecting the colonial body

The mummy's hand in fiction
Excerpts

H.D. Everett, *Iras: A Mystery*, 1896, pp. 38-39

As I sat at the table with the inscription before me, my back was turned to the coffin. I pushed the chair sideways and glanced round at it, when all power of movement was arrested by surprise. Thrown carelessly out of the disturbed wrappings, and hanging over the edge, was a woman's arm – slender, exquisitely rounded, warm with life. Was it believable that a human creature could have existed under such conditions and in such suspension for three thousand years? The trance of a toad shut in a rock paralleled by enchantment! The first shock of conviction past, I started to my feet – I would look nearer at this wonder. The rotten shreds of tissue had been torn apart by the movement of the arm, and there within lay the sleeper in the perfect bloom of her young womanhood, white robed from throat to foot, the darkly fringed eyes still closed, the soft breathing just stirring the linen folds which veiled her breast.

The face I looked upon was beautiful, but it was a marvel the more that I did not regard it in the least as one looks upon the beauty of a stranger. I knew my heart's one love when I saw her face to face. All the aching loss of my solitary life – all I had lacked hardly knowing – was present to me in that moment, as I recognised a need filled, an incompleteness suddenly made whole. Will that be the fashion of those meetings in a world beyond to which some strong in faith look forward? Speechless with the wonder of it, new born into joy and into a rarer atmosphere where it was difficult at first to breathe, I stood and looked upon the sleep which I alone from the beginnings of the ages had been ordained to break. Was it moments or hours before I took the warm small hand in my own, before the red lips parted with a sigh, the dark-fringed eyelids lifted, and the eyes and the soul behind them looked into mine?

Bram Stoker, *The Jewel of Seven Stars*, 1903

Queen Tera's mummified hand, p. 94

Within, on a cushion of cloth of gold as fine as silk, and with the peculiar softness of old gold, rested a mummy hand, so perfect that it startled one to see it. A woman's hand, fine and long, with slim tapering fingers and nearly as perfect as when it was given to the embalmer thousands of years before. In the embalming it had lost nothing of its beautiful shape; even the wrist seemed to maintain its pliability as the gentle curve lay on the cushion. The skin was of a rich creamy or old ivory colour; a dusky fair skin which suggested heat, but heat in shadow. The great peculiarity of it, as a hand, was that it had in all seven fingers, there being two middle and two index fingers. The upper end of the wrist was jagged, as though it had been broken off, and was stained with a red-brown

stain. On the cushion near the hand was a small scarab, exquisitely wrought of emerald.

Margaret Trelawny's hand, p. 160

Margaret looked from me to him, and back again; and her eyes fell. When I was close to her, Mr. Trelawny let go my hand, and, looking his daughter straight in the face, said: "If things are as I fancy, we shall not have any secrets between us. Malcolm Ross knows so much of my affairs already, that I take it he must either let matters stop where they are and go away in silence, or else he must know more. Margaret! are you willing to let Mr. Ross see your wrist?"

She threw one swift look of appeal in his eyes; but even as she did so she seemed to make up her mind. Without a word she raised her right hand, so that the bracelet of spreading wings which covered the wrist fell back, leaving the flesh bare. Then an icy chill shot through me.

On her wrist was a thin red jagged line, from which seemed to hang red stains like drops of blood!

She stood there, a veritable figure of patient pride.

Oh! but she looked proud! Through all her sweetness, all her dignity, all her high-souled negation of self which I had known, and which never seemed more marked than now—through all the fire that seemed to shine from the dark depths of her eyes into my very soul, pride shone conspicuously. The pride that has faith; the pride that is born of conscious purity; the pride of a veritable queen of Old Time, when to be royal was to be the first and greatest and bravest in all high things. As we stood thus for some seconds, the deep, grave voice of her father seemed to sound a challenge in my ears:

"What do you say now?"

My answer was not in words. I caught Margaret's right hand in mine as it fell, and, holding it tight, whilst with the other I pushed back the golden cincture, stooped and kissed the wrist. As I looked up at her, but never letting go her hand, there was a look of joy on her face such as I dream of when I think of heaven.

H. Rider Haggard, "Smith and the Pharaohs", 1913, p. 20

The first thing that met his eyes was a mummied hand, broken off at the wrist, a woman's little hand, most delicately shaped. It was withered and paper-white, but the contours still remained; the long fingers were perfect, and the almond-shaped nails had been stained with henna, as was the embalmers' fashion. On the hand were two gold rings, and for those rings it had been stolen. Smith looked at it for a long while, and his heart swelled within him, for here was the hand of that royal lady of his dreams.

Indeed, he did more than look; he kissed it, and as his lips touched the holy relic it seemed to him as though a wind, cold but scented, blew upon his brow. Then, growing fearful of the thoughts that arose within him, he hurried his mind back to the world, or rather to the examination of the basket.