

The Handshake

retold by S.E. Schlosser

Polly was the sweetest, prettiest girl in Goldsboro, yes sir. All the local boys were chasing her, and quite a number of the fellows from the surrounding countryside were too. All the girls were jealous of Polly 'cause they didn't have no sweethearts to take them to the local dances. They all wanted Polly to choose her man so things could go back to normal. But Polly was picky. None of the local boys suited her, and neither did the fellows from the back country.

Then one day, George Dean came home from university, and Polly was smitten. Polly completely dropped all her other beaux when George came courting, and it wasn't long before George proposed and Polly accepted.

Polly started making preparations for the wedding and shopping for items to fill her new home. George wasn't too interested in all the fripperies and wedding details. He left the womenfolk to get on with it and started spending time down at the pool hall with some of his buddies. And that's where he met Helene, the owner's saucy daughter. She had bold black eyes and ruby red lips, and a bad-girl air that fascinated George. He spent more and more time at the pool hall, and less and less time with Polly, who finally noticed in spite of all the hustle and bustle.

Of course, Polly was furious. She immediately confronted George with the story, and he couldn't deny it. Suddenly, George had to toe the mark. His pool-hall visits were over, and he spent every free hour he wasn't at work by her side. That didn't sit well with George, but his family backed Polly up, so he went along with it.

The day of the wedding dawned clear and bright. The guests filled the sanctuary, and the pastor and the best man waited patiently in the ante-chamber for the arrival of the groom. But George didn't come. Eventually, they went searching for the missing bridegroom, and found out he'd left town with Helene an hour before the wedding. With dread, Polly's mother went to tell her daughter what had happened. Polly, all bright and shining and lovely in her long white dress and soft wedding veil, turned pale when her mother broke the news. Then she stiffened, grabbing her left arm as a sudden pain ripped through it. She was dead from a massive heart attack long before she hit the floor.

A few days later, Polly was buried in the churchyard, still wearing her white wedding dress and veil. The whole town came to the funeral and wept at the passing of such a beautiful young girl. George and Helene, who had spent the week happily honeymooning in the Outer Banks, arrived home at the very moment that the black-clad crowd exited the churchyard. Their arrival caused a commotion. The minister had to pull Polly's father off George before he killed him. And both George and Helene's family

disowned the couple right there in the street in front of everyone. The couple fled town in disgrace.

Time passed, and eventually the scandal was forgotten. Until the day George's father passed away. It was rumored that he was to be buried in the local churchyard just a few plots away from the girl who had almost become his daughter. Suddenly, the story of Polly's jilting was revived and folks wondered aloud if George would dare attend his father's funeral. But George was too clever for them. He waited at an inn outside of town until it was dark, and then he went to the churchyard to pay his last respects to his father.

As he unburdened himself at his father's graveside, George heard a sweet female voice calling his name. "George. Sweetheart." George looked up in sudden hope. Was that his mother, come to forgive him? Then he saw, rising up from a grassy mound under a spreading oak tree, a figure in a long white gown and a soft veil. Her eyes and her lips were yellow flames beneath the veil, and the rotted wedding dress glowed with a white-yellow light. It was Polly.

George's body stiffened, shudders of fear coursing up and down his arms and legs. He put a shaking hand to his mouth and staggered backward, the other hand outstretched out ward off the specter floating toward him. The spectral bride cackled with angry laughter and swooped forward until its hand closed over George's outstretched one in a terrible parody of a handshake. The grip of the spectral bride was so cold it burned the skin, and so hard that the bones crunched as it squeezed. "Come along into the church, George," the glowing bride whispered. Through the veil, George could see maggots crawling in and out of Polly's flaming eye sockets.

"Nooo! Polly, no!" George screamed in terror, but he could not wrench his hand free. The ghost dragged him step by halting step toward the front door of the church. His hand was a red-hot agony of pain, though the rest of his body was shaking with cold.

"No!" George gave a final cry of despair and wrenched again at his hand. And suddenly, he was free. The spectral bride gave a roar of rage as George ran pell-mell down the church lane and out into the street.

"You're mine, George Dean! If not in this world, than in the next," the spectral bride howled after him.

By the time George reached his room, the fiery pain in his hand and arm was seeping through his entire body. He rang desperately for the house maid and begged her to send for a doctor. Then he fell into bed and stared at his hand, which was black and withered, as if it had been scorched long ago by a fire. Black and red streaks were climbing up his arm so fast he could almost see them move.

George was unconscious when the doctor arrived, and the swelling was already extending into his chest and neck. There was nothing the physician could do. The injury was too severe and had spread too far.

Within two days, George was dead. Polly had gotten her man at last.

You can read more ghost stories in [Spooky North Carolina](#), by S.E. Schlosser.