

## **The Finger Of God**

BY PERCIVAL WILDE

Copyright, 1915, by Percival Wilde. Professional stage and motion picture rights reserved.

THE FINGER OF GOD was produced by the Wisconsin Players at the Wisconsin Little Theatre, Milwaukee, Wis., March 28, 1916, and subsequently, with the following cast:

STRICKLAND *Frederick Irving Deakin*. BENSON *Harry V. Meissner*. A GIRL *Marjorie Frances Hollis*.

Under the direction of FREDERIC IRVING DEAKIN.

Reprinted from "Dawn, and Other One-Act Plays of Life To-day" by permission of, and special arrangement with, Mr. Wilde. The acting rights in this play are strictly reserved. Performances may be given by *amateurs* upon payment to the author of a royalty of five dollars (\$5.00) for each performance. Production by professional actors, without the written consent of the author, is forbidden. Persons who wish to produce this play should apply to Mr. Percival Wilde, in care of Walter H. Baker & Co., 5 Hamilton Place, Boston, Mass.

THE FINGER OF GOD

A PLAY BY PERCIVAL WILDE

*[The living room of Strickland's apartment. At the rear, a doorway, heavily curtained, leads into another room. At the left of the doorway, a bay window, also heavily curtained, is set into the diagonal wall. Near the center, an ornate writing desk, upon which is a telephone. At the right, the main entrance. The furnishings, in general, are luxurious and costly.]*

*As the curtain rises Strickland, kneeling, is burning papers in a grate near the main door. Benson, his valet, is packing a suitcase which lies*

*open on the writing desk. It is ten-thirty; a bitterly cold night in winter.]*

STRICKLAND. Benson!

BENSON. Yes, sir.

STRICKLAND. Close the window: it's cold.

BENSON [*goes to the window*]. The window *is* closed, sir. It's been closed all evening.

STRICKLAND [*shivers and buttons his coat tightly*]. Benson.

BENSON. Yes, sir?

STRICKLAND. Don't forget a heavy overcoat.

BENSON. I've put it in already, sir.

STRICKLAND. Plenty of fresh linen?

BENSON. Yes, sir.

STRICKLAND. Collars and ties?

BENSON. I've looked out for everything, sir.

STRICKLAND [*after a pause*]. You sent off the trunks this afternoon?

BENSON. Yes, sir.

STRICKLAND. You're sure they can't be traced?

BENSON. I had one wagon take them to a vacant lot, and another wagon take them to the station.

STRICKLAND. Good!

BENSON. I checked them through to Chicago. Here are the checks.  
[*He hands them over.*] What train do we take, sir?

STRICKLAND. *I* take the midnight. You follow me some time next week. We mustn't be seen leaving town together.

BENSON. How will I find you in Chicago?

STRICKLAND. You won't. You'll take rooms somewheres, and I'll take rooms somewheres else till it's all blown over. When I want you I'll put an ad in the "Tribune."

BENSON. You don't know when that will be, sir?

STRICKLAND. As soon as I think it is safe. It may be two weeks. It may be a couple of months. But you will stay in Chicago till you hear from me one way or the other. You understand?

BENSON. Yes, sir.

STRICKLAND. Have you plenty of money?

BENSON. Not enough to last a couple of months.

STRICKLAND [*producing a large pocketbook*]. How much do you want?

BENSON. Five or six hundred.

STRICKLAND [*takes out a few bills. Stops*]. Wait a minute! I left that much in my bureau drawer.

[*He goes toward the door.*]

BENSON. Mr. Strickland?

STRICKLAND. Yes?

BENSON. It's the midnight train for Chicago, isn't it?

STRICKLAND. Yes.

[*He goes into the next room.*]

BENSON [*waits an instant. Then he lifts the telephone receiver, and speaks very quietly*]. Hello. Murray Hill 3500.... Hello. This Finley? This is Benson.... He's going to take the midnight train for Chicago. Pennsylvania. You had better arrest him at the station. If he once gets to Chicago you'll never find him. And, Finley, you won't forget *me*, will you?... I want five thousand dollars for it. Yes, five thousand. That's little enough. He's got almost three hundred thousand on him, and you won't turn in *all* of that to Headquarters. Yes, it's cash. Large bills. [*Strickland's step is heard.*] Midnight for Chicago.

[*Benson hangs up the receiver and is busy with the suitcase as Strickland enters.*]

STRICKLAND. Here's your money, Benson. Count it.

BENSON [*after counting*]. Six hundred dollars, thank you, sir. [*He picks up the closed suitcase.*] Shall I go now?

STRICKLAND. No. Wait a minute. [*He goes to the telephone.*] Hello, Madison Square 7900 ... Pennsylvania? I want a stateroom for Chicago, midnight train. Yes, to-night.

BENSON. Don't give your own name, sir.

STRICKLAND. No. The name is Stevens.... Oh, you have one reserved in that name already? Well, this is *Alfred Stevens*.... You have it reserved in that name? Then give me another stateroom.... What? You haven't any other? [*He pauses in an instant's thought. Then, decisively*]: Never mind, then. Good-by. [*He turns to Benson.*] Benson, go right down to the Pennsylvania, and get the stateroom that is reserved for Alfred Stevens. You've got to get there before he does. Wait for me at the train gate.

BENSON. Yes, sir.

STRICKLAND. Don't waste any time. I'll see you later.

BENSON. Very well, sir.

*[He takes up the suitcase, and goes.]*

STRICKLAND *[left alone, opens drawer after drawer of the desk systematically, dumping what few papers are still left into the fire. Outside a wintry gale whistles, and shakes the locked window. Suddenly there is a knock at the door. He pauses, very much startled. A little wait, and then the knock, a single knock, is repeated. He rises, goes to the door, opens it.]* Who's there?

A GIRL. I, sir.

*[She enters. She is young: certainly under thirty: perhaps under twenty-five: possibly still younger. A somewhat shabby boa of some dark fur encircles her neck, and makes her pallid face stand out with startling distinctness from beneath a mass of lustrous brown hair. And as she steps over the threshold she gives a little shiver of comfort, for it is cold outside, and her thin shoulders have been shielded from the driving snow by a threadbare coat. She enters the warm room gracefully, and little rivulets of melted ice trickle to the floor from her inadequate clothing. Her lips are blue. Her hands tremble in their worn white gloves. A seat before a blazing fire, or perhaps, a sip of some strong cordial--this is what she needs. But Strickland has no time for such things. He greets her with a volley of questions.]*

STRICKLAND. Who are you?

THE GIRL. Who, don't you remember me, sir?

STRICKLAND. No.

THE GIRL. I'm from the office, sir.

STRICKLAND. The office?

THE GIRL. *Your* office. I'm one of your personal stenographers, sir.

STRICKLAND. Oh. I suppose I didn't recognize you on account of the hat. What do you want?

THE GIRL. There were some letters which came late this afternoon--

STRICKLAND [*interrupting harshly*]. And you're bothering me with them now? [*He crosses to the door, and holds it open.*] I've got no time. Good night.

THE GIRL [*timidly*]. I thought you'd want to see these letters.

STRICKLAND. Plenty of time to-morrow.

THE GIRL. But you won't be here to-morrow, will you?

STRICKLAND [*starting violently*]. Won't be here? What do you mean?

THE GIRL. You're taking the train to Chicago to-night.

STRICKLAND. How did you know--[*He stops himself. Then, with forced ease.*] Taking a train to Chicago? Of course not! What put that in your head?

THE GIRL. Why, you told me, sir.

STRICKLAND. *I* told you?

THE GIRL. You said so this afternoon.

STRICKLAND [*harshly*]. I didn't see you this afternoon!

THE GIRL [*without contradicting him*]. No, sir? [*She produces a time-table.*] Then I found this time-table.

[*She holds it out. He snatches it.*]

STRICKLAND. Where did you find it?

THE GIRL. On your desk, sir.

STRICKLAND. On my desk?

THE GIRL. Yes, sir.

STRICKLAND [*suddenly and directly*]. You're lying!

THE GIRL. Why, Mr. Strickland!

STRICKLAND. That time-table never reached my desk! I lost it between the railroad station and my office.

THE GIRL. Did you, sir? But it's the same time-table: you see, you checked the midnight train. [*He looks at her suspiciously.*] I reserved a stateroom for you.

STRICKLAND [*astonished*]. You reserved a stateroom?

THE GIRL [*smiling*]. I knew you'd forget it. You have your head so full of other things. So I telephoned as soon as you left the office.

STRICKLAND [*biting his lip angrily*]. I suppose you made the reservation in my own name?

THE GIRL. No, sir.

STRICKLAND [*immensely surprised*]. What?

THE GIRL. I thought you'd prefer some other name: you didn't want your trip to be known.

STRICKLAND. No, I didn't. [*A good deal startled, he looks at her as if he were about to ask, "How did you know that?" She returns his gaze unflinchingly. The question remains unasked. But a sudden thought strikes him.*] What name did you give?

THE GIRL. Stevens, sir.

STRICKLAND [*thunderstruck*]. Stevens?

THE GIRL. Alfred Stevens.

STRICKLAND [*gasping*]. What made you choose that name?

THE GIRL. I don't know, sir.

STRICKLAND. You don't *know*?

THE GIRL. No, sir. It was just the first name that popped into my head. I said "Stevens," and when the clerk asked for the first name, I said "Alfred."

STRICKLAND [*after a pause*]. Have you ever *known* anybody of that name?

THE GIRL. No, sir.

STRICKLAND [*with curious insistence*]. You are *sure* you never knew anybody of that name?

THE GIRL. How can I be sure? I may have; I don't remember it.

STRICKLAND [*abruptly*]. How old are you? [*He gives her no time to answer.*] You're not twenty, are you?

THE GIRL [*smiling*]. Do you think so?

STRICKLAND [*continuing the current of his thoughts*]. And I'm forty-seven. It was more than twenty-five years ago.... You couldn't have known.

THE GIRL [*after a pause*]. No, sir.

STRICKLAND [*looking at her with something of fear in his eye*]. What is your name?

THE GIRL. Does it matter? You didn't recognize my *face* a few minutes ago; my *name* can't mean much to you. I'm just one of the office force: I'm the girl who answers when you push the button three times. [*She opens a handbag.*] These are the letters I brought with me.



STRICKLAND [*not offering to take them*]. What are they about?

THE GIRL [*opening the first*]. This is from a woman who wants to invest some money.

STRICKLAND. How much?

THE GIRL. Only a thousand dollars.

STRICKLAND. Why didn't you turn it over to the clerks?

THE GIRL. The savings of a lifetime, she writes.

STRICKLAND. What of it?

THE GIRL. She wrote that she had confidence in you. She says that she wants you to invest it for her yourself.

STRICKLAND. You shouldn't have bothered me with that. [*He pauses.*] Did she inclose the money?

THE GIRL. Yes. A certified check.

[*She hands it over to him.*]

STRICKLAND [*taking the check, and putting it in his pocketbook*]. Write her--oh, you know what to write: that I will give the matter my personal attention.

THE GIRL. Yes, sir. She says she doesn't want a big return on her investment. She wants something that will be perfectly safe, and she knows you will take care of her.

STRICKLAND. Yes. Of course. What else have you?

THE GIRL. A dozen other letters like it.

STRICKLAND. All from old women?

THE GIRL [*seriously*]. Some of them. Here is one from a young man who has saved a little money. He says that when he gets a little more he's going to open a store, and go into business for himself. Here is another from a girl whose father was an ironworker. He was killed accidentally, and she wants you to invest the insurance. Here is another from--but they're all pretty much alike.

STRICKLAND. Why did you bring them here?

THE GIRL. Every one of these letters asks you to do the investing yourself.

STRICKLAND. Oh!

THE GIRL. And you're leaving town to-night. Here are the checks. [*She passes them over.*] Every one of them is made out to you personally; not to the firm.

STRICKLAND [*after a pause*]. You shouldn't have come here.... I haven't time to bother with that sort of thing. Every man who has five dollars to invest asks the head of the firm to attend to it himself. It means nothing. I get hundreds of letters like those.

THE GIRL. Still--

STRICKLAND. What?

THE GIRL. You must do something to deserve such letters or they wouldn't keep on coming in. [*She smiles.*] It's a wonderful thing to inspire such confidence in people?

STRICKLAND. Do you think so?

THE GIRL. It is more than wonderful! It is magnificent! These people don't know you from Adam. Not one in a hundred has seen you: not one in a thousand calls you by your first name. But they've all heard of you: you're as real to them as if you were a member of their family. And what is even more real than you is your reputation! Something in which they rest their absolute confidence: something in which they place their implicit trust!

STRICKLAND [*slowly*]. So you think there are few honest men?

THE GIRL. No: there are many of them. But there is something about you that is different: something in the tone of your voice: something in the way you shake hands: something in the look of your eye, that is reassuring. There is never a doubt--never a question about you. Oh, it's splendid! Simply splendid! [*She pauses.*] What a satisfaction it must be to you to walk along the street and know that every one you meet must say to himself, "There goes an honest man!" It's been such an inspiration to me!

STRICKLAND. To *you*?

THE GIRL. Oh, I know that I'm just one of the office force to you. You don't even know my name. But you don't imagine that any one can see you as I have seen you, can work with you as I have worked with you, without there being *some* kind of an effect? You know, in my own troubles--

STRICKLAND [*interrupting*]. So *you* have troubles?

THE GIRL. You don't pay me a very big salary, and there are others whom I must help. But I'm not complaining. [*She smiles.*] I--I used to be like the other girls. I used to watch the clock. I used to count the hours and the minutes till the day's work was over. But it's different now.

STRICKLAND [*slowly*]. How--different?

THE GIRL. I thought it over, and I made up my mind that it wasn't right to count the minutes you worked for an honest man. [*Strickland turns away.*] And there is a new pleasure in my work: I do my best--that's all I can do, but *you* do your best, and it's the *least* I can do.

STRICKLAND [*after a pause*]. Are you sure--I do my best? Are you sure I am an honest man?

THE GIRL. Don't you know it yourself, Mr. Strickland?

STRICKLAND [*after another pause*]. You remember--a few minutes ago, you spoke the name of Alfred Stevens?

THE GIRL. Yes.

STRICKLAND. Suppose I told you that there once *was* an Alfred Stevens? [*The girl does not answer.*] Suppose I told you that Stevens, whom I knew, stole money--stole it when there was no excuse for it--when he didn't need it. His people had plenty, and they gave him plenty. But the chance came, and he couldn't resist the temptation.... He was eighteen years old then.

THE GIRL [*gently*]. Only a boy.

STRICKLAND. Only a boy, yes, but he had the dishonest streak in him! Other boys passed by the same opportunity. Stevens didn't even know what to do with the money when he had stolen it. They caught him in less than twenty-four hours. It was almost funny.

THE GIRL. He was punished.

STRICKLAND [*nodding*]. He served a year in jail. God! What a year! His folks wouldn't do a thing for him: they said such a thing had never happened in the family. And they let him take the consequences. [*He pauses.*] When he got out--[*stopping to correct himself*]--when he was *let* out, his family offered him help. But he was too proud to accept the help: it hadn't been offered when he needed it most. He told his family that he never wanted to see them again. He changed his name so they couldn't find him. He left his home town. He came here.

THE GIRL. And he has been honest ever since!

STRICKLAND. Ever since: for twenty-eight years! It was hard at times, terribly hard! In the beginning, when he had to go hungry and cold, when he saw other men riding around in carriages, he wondered if he hadn't made a mistake. He had knocked about a good deal; he had learnt a lot, and he wouldn't have been caught so easily the second time. It was *almost* worth taking the chance! It was *almost* worth getting a foot of lead pipe, and waiting in some dark street, waiting, waiting for some sleek *honest* man with his pockets full of money! It

would have been so simple! And he knew *how*! I don't know why he didn't do it.

THE GIRL. Tell me more.

STRICKLAND. He managed to live. It wasn't pleasant living. But he stayed alive! I don't like to think of what he did to stay alive: it was humiliating; it was shameful, because he hadn't been brought up to do that kind of thing, but it was honest. Honest, and when he walked home from his work at six o'clock, walked home to save the nickel, his betters never crowded him because they didn't want to soil their clothes with his *honest* dirt! He had thought the year in jail was terrible. The first year he was free was worse. He had never been hungry in jail.

THE GIRL. Then his chance came.

STRICKLAND. Yes, it *was* a chance. He found a purse in the gutter, and he returned it to the owner before he had made up his mind whether to keep it or not. So they said he was honest! He knew he wasn't! He knew that he had returned it because there was so much money in it that he was afraid to keep it, but he never told them that. And when the man who owned the purse gave him a job, he worked--worked because he was afraid not to work--worked so that he wouldn't have any time to think, because he knew that if he began to think, he would begin to steal! Then they said he was a hard worker, and they promoted him: they made him manager. That gave him more chances to steal, but there were so many men watching him, so many men anxious for him to make a slip so that they might climb over him, that he didn't dare.

[*He pauses.*]

THE GIRL. And then?

STRICKLAND. The rest was easy. Nothing succeeds like a good reputation, and he didn't steal because he knew they'd catch him. [*He pauses again.*] But he wasn't honest at bottom! The rotten streak was still there! After twenty-eight years things began to be bad. He speculated: lost all the money he could call his own, and he made up

his mind to take other money that *wasn't* his own, all he could lay his hands on, and run off with it! It was wrong! It was the work of a lifetime gone to hell! But it was the rottenness in him coming to the surface! It was the thief he thought dead coming to life again!

THE GIRL [*after a pause*]. What a pity!

STRICKLAND. He had been honest so long--he had made other people think that he was honest so long, that he had made *himself* think that he was honest!

THE GIRL. Was he wrong, Mr. Strickland?

STRICKLAND [*looking into her eyes; very quietly*]. Stevens, please. [*There is a long pause.*] I don't know what sent you: who sent you: but you've come here to-night as I am running away. You're too late. You can't stop me. Not even the finger of God Himself could stop me! I've gone too far. [*He goes on in a voice which is low, but terrible in its earnestness.*] Here is money! [*He pulls out his pocketbook.*] Hundreds of thousands of it, not a cent of it mine! And I'm stealing it, do you understand me? *Stealing* it! To-morrow the firm will be bankrupt, and there'll be a reward out for me. [*He smiles grimly, and bows.*] Here, if you please, is your honest man! What have you to say to him?

THE GIRL [*very quietly*]. The man who has been honest so long that he has made *himself* think that he is honest can't steal!

STRICKLAND [*hoarsely*]. You believe *that*?

THE GIRL [*opening her bag again*]. I was left a little money this week: only a few hundred dollars, hardly enough to bother you with. Will you take care of it for me--Alfred Stevens?

STRICKLAND. Good God!

[*And utterly unnerved he collapses to a chair. There is a long pause.*]

THE GIRL [*crossing slowly to the window, and drawing aside the curtain*]. Look! What a beautiful night! The thousands of sleeping houses! The millions of shining stars! And the lights beneath! And in

the distance, how the stars and the lights meet! So that one cannot say:  
"Here Gods ends; Here Man begins."

*[The telephone rings, harshly, and shrilly. Strickland goes to the receiver.]*

STRICKLAND [*quietly*]. Yes?... You're afraid I'm going to miss the train?... Yes? Well, I'm *going* to miss the train!... I'm going to stay and face the music! [*Hysterically.*] I'm an honest man, d'ye hear me? I'm an honest man. [*And furiously, he pitches the telephone to the floor, and stands panting, shivering, on the spot. From the window a soft radiance beckons, and trembling in every limb, putting out his hands as if to ward off some unseen obstacle, he moves there slowly.*] Did you hear what I told him? I'm going to make good. I'm going to face the music! Because I'm an honest man! An honest man!

*[He gasps, stops abruptly, and in a sudden panic-stricken movement, tears the curtains down. The window is closed--has never been opened--but the girl has vanished. And as Strickland, burying his face in his hands, drops to his knees in awe,*

*The Curtain Falls.*