

AN APPARITION

From the French of Guy de Maupassant

Illustrator COYE

Devotees of fantasy have so thoroughly ransacked the literature of the past that seldom can we hope to find a tale from times gone by. But recently we found an old and tattered volume of short stories and in it no less than three narratives we think you will enjoy. The first is a ghost story in the ancient tradition, written by France's master short-story craftsman.

IT was at the end of an evening of intimate social chat, in an old family mansion, and each one told a story of his or her personal experience—and vouched for the truth of it. Just then the old Marquis de la Tour-Samuel, eighty-two years old, rose and stood leaning against the chimney-piece, saying in a slightly trembling voice:

I, too, know a strange thing, so strange that it has been the bane of my life. It is now fifty-six years since it happened to me, and not a month has passed without my dreaming of it. I have had ever since that day a mark, a scar of fear, as it were. Yes, I went through such a horrible experience for ten minutes,

that ever since I have had a constant terror. Unexpected noises make me tremble to the depths of my heart; things which I cannot see clearly in the twilight make me have a wild desire to run away, and I actually dread nightfall. Oh! I should not have told you all this if I were not so old. Now I can say anything. One is not expected to be brave before imaginary dangers at my age, but I assure you, ladies, that I have never quailed before real ones. This experience affected me so deeply and mysteriously that I have never yet told a soul of it, but have kept the secret locked in my breast, as if it were something to be ashamed of.

I will tell you the adventure as



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it happened, without trying to explain it. In fact, there is no possible explanation unless you assume that I was for the time out of my mind. But I was not out of my mind, and I will prove it to you, so you may think what you like, but here are the bare facts.

It was in July, 1827, and I was in garrison at Rouen. One day, as I was walking on the quay, I met a man whom I thought I knew, though I could not quite recall who it was. I made instinctively a motion to stop. The stranger saw the movement, looked at me, and fell into my arms. It was a friend of my boyhood, of whom I was very fond. In the five years since I had last seen him, he seemed to have grown older by half a century. His hair was perfectly white, and he walked with a stoop, as if worn out. He understood my surprise and told me his story. A terrible misfortune had made him a broken man.

Having fallen madly in love with a young girl, he had married her in a sort of ecstasy of happiness. After a year of unalloyed bliss she had suddenly died from some heart trouble, undoubtedly killed by love itself. He left his château the very day of the funeral and came to live in his house in Rouen, alone and desperate, overcome by grief, and thinking only of suicide.

"Since I have found you again," he said to me, "I am going to ask you to do me a great service. It is to go and look for me in the desk in my room—in our room—for some papers of which I am in great need. I cannot entrust this task to a servant or an agent, because it is necessary to have it done with great discretion and absolute silence. As for me, nothing would induce me to enter that house again. I will give you the key of the room, which I myself locked on leaving, and the key of my desk. You will also have a message from me to my gardener, who will open the château for you. But come and breakfast with me to-morrow, and we will talk it over."

I promised to do him this slight service. It was but a short jaunt for me, his house being situated about five leagues from Rouen.

At ten o'clock the next morning I was with him. We breakfasted together, but he did not speak twenty words. He begged me to excuse him, saying that the thought of the visit which I was going to make to the room where his happiness lay buried was too much for him. He did indeed seem to me to be strangely moved, preoccupied, as if a mysterious struggle were going on in his soul. At last he explained to me exactly what I was

to do, which was to get two packages of letters and one of papers which were in the first right-hand drawer of the desk to which I had the key. He added: "I need not ask you not to look about you."

I was a little hurt by these words, and told him so rather sharply. He stammered, "Forgive me, I am suffering so much," and he began to cry.

I left him about one o'clock to do my errand.

It was a glorious day, and I went at a rapid trot across the meadows, listening to the singing of the skylarks and the rhythmical sound of my sword against my boot. Before long I entered the forest and brought my horse to a walk. The branches of the trees brushed my face, and occasionally I bit off a leaf and crunched it eagerly, in one of those ecstasies of life which fills us, we know not how, with a flood of happiness, a sort of intoxication of strength.

As I neared the château, I felt in my pocket for the letter which I had for the gardener, and I saw to my surprise that it was sealed. I was so wounded and provoked that I thought of returning without carrying out my intention. Then I reflected that by doing this I should show unnecessary feeling. My friend had probably sealed the note mechanically, in the trouble he was in.

The house had the air of having been abandoned for twenty years. The entrance gate, open and rotten, remained upright by a miracle. Grass choked the pathways, and the borders of the grass-plots were no longer to be seen.

At the noise which I made by kicking against a shutter, an old man came out of a side door and seemed stupefied at seeing me. I jumped to the ground and gave him my letter. He read it, re-read it, turned it, looked me over, put it in his pocket and said:

"Well, what do you want?"

I answered brusquely:

"You ought to know, as you have just read your master's orders. I want to go into the house."

He seemed overcome and exclaimed:

"Then you are going into—into his room?"

I began to grow impatient. "What! are you going to question me?"

"No, sir, but it has—has not been opened since—since the death. If you will wait five minutes I will go—go see, if—"

I interrupted him angrily. "Oh, indeed; you will get it in order for me when you can't even get in, for I have the key."

He could say no more.

"Then, sir, I will show you the way."

"Just show me the staircase. I can find it very well without you."

"But, sir, indeed I must—"

This time I quite lost my temper.

"Be silent, or you will get yourself into trouble," and I pushed him roughly aside and entered the house. I passed through the kitchen, then through two little rooms in which the man and his wife lived, and reached a large hall. I climbed the stairs and recognized the door described by my friend. I opened it without difficulty and entered.

THE room was so dark that at first I could distinguish nothing. I paused, struck by the mouldy, musty smell of shut-up, lifeless rooms. Then, by degrees, my eyes became used to the gloom, and I saw clearly enough a large disordered room, with a bed without hangings, but with mattress and pillows, of which one still bore the deep imprint of a head, as if some one had just been lying there. The chairs were scattered about, and I noticed that one door, probably that of a closet, was half open.

I went first to the window to get some light, and opened it; but the hinges of the outside shutters were so rusty that I could not move them. I even tried to break the shutters with my sword, but could not succeed.

As I was tired of these useless efforts, and as my eyes were now quite used to the dim light, I gave

up the hope of seeing more clearly and went to the desk. I sat down in an easy-chair, lowered the lid, and opened the drawer. It was full to the brim. I only needed three packages and knew how to recognize them, so I began the search.

I was straining my eyes to decipher the superscriptions, when I thought I heard, or rather felt, a slight rustling behind me. I took no notice of it, thinking that a draught of air had made something move. But at the end of a minute, another movement, scarcely perceptible, made a very disagreeable shiver creep over me. It was so silly to be affected, even slightly, that I did not like to turn around, for very shame. I had secured the second bundle that I wanted, and had just found the third, when a deep and painful sigh, breathed over my shoulder, made me leap madly two yards away. I turned in my flight, with my hand on my sword-hilt, and indeed, if I had not felt that at my side I should have fled like a coward.

A large woman, in white, was standing behind the chair in which I had been sitting the instant before, looking at me.

Such a shiver ran through my limbs that I could not stand. Oh! no one who has not felt it can understand this frightful terror. One's brain reels, one's heart stands still, one's whole body be-

comes like a sponge; it seems as if one's being crumbled. I do not believe in ghosts, but I have yielded to the hideous fear of the dead, and I have suffered—yes, in a few minutes suffered more than in all the rest of my life, in the terrible agony of supernatural fear.

If she had not spoken I might have died! But she did speak, in a sad and gentle voice, which made my nerves quiver. I cannot say that I became master of myself and found my reason again. No, I was so terrified that I no longer knew what I did, but the pride which I have, a pride of my soldier's trade, perhaps, made me keep, in spite of myself, a respectable appearance, both to myself and to her, whatever she was, woman or spectre. I thought of this afterward, for I can tell you that when it happened I thought of nothing. I was simply terror-stricken. She said:

“Oh, sir, you can do me a great favor.”

I tried to answer, but I could not utter a word. An indistinct noise came from my lips. She spoke again:

“Will you? You can save me, cure me. I suffer frightfully. I suffer all the time. I suffer, oh! I suffer.”

And she sat slowly down in my chair, looking at me.

“Will you?”

I motioned “Yes” with my

head, my voice being still paralyzed. Then she held out to me a tortoise-shell comb and murmured:

“Comb my hair, oh! comb my hair. That will cure me. Some one must do it. Look at my head! How I suffer, and how badly my hair is arranged!”

HER unbound hair, very long and black it seemed to me, hung over the back of the chair and touched the floor.

Why did I do it, Why did I take the comb, shuddering, and why did I take in my hands her long hair which made me feel as cold as if I were handling serpents, I cannot tell.

That feeling has stayed in my fingers, and I shiver to think of it. I combed her hair. I touched—I do not know how—those icy tresses; I twisted and untwisted them; I braided them as they braid a horse's mane. She sighed, bent her head, and seemed happy.

Suddenly she said, “Thank you,” took the comb from my hands, and went out by the door which I had noticed was half open.

Left alone, I had for some seconds the terrible fright which one has after the nightmare. Then I came to myself. I rushed to the window and burst open the shutters with a frightful blow.

Daylight flooded the room.

I sprang to the door through

which the Something had disappeared.

It was closed and locked.

Then a fever of flight seized me, the true panic of battles. I snatched the three bundles of letters from the open desk, rushed across the room, leaped down the stairs four at a time, found myself outside, I knew not where, and seeing my horse ten feet away, bounded to his back and galloped off. I did not draw rein until I was in front of my lodgings at Rouen, when, throwing the bridle to my orderly, I fled to my room and locked myself in.

Then for an hour I asked myself anxiously if I had not been the victim of an hallucination. Yes, I must have had one of those strange nervous freaks which give rise to miracles, and to which the supernatural owes its strength.

And I had come to believe it was a vision, a deception of the senses, when I happened to go near the window.

My eyes accidentally fell on my breast. My coat was covered with hairs, long hairs of a woman, which were caught around the buttons. I took them one by one, and threw them out of the window with trembling fingers.

Then I called my orderly. I was

too much disturbed to go to see my friend that day, and besides, I wanted to decide what I ought to tell him. I sent him the letters, for which he gave the soldier a receipt. He asked a great many questions about me.

They told him that I was suffering, that I had had a sun-stroke, that—I do not know what.

He seemed uneasy.

* * *

I went early the next morning to see him, resolved to tell him the truth.

He had gone out the evening before and had not returned. I went again during the day, but no one had seen him. I waited a week. He did not appear.

Then I notified the authorities. They searched for him everywhere, without discovering the slightest trace of his flight.

A thorough search was made of the deserted château, but no discoveries were made.

There was no sign of a woman's having been concealed there.

The search amounting to nothing, it was given up. And after fifty-six years I have learned nothing. I know no more.

THE END

