

THE HAND

GUY DE MAUPASSANT

A circle had formed round Monsieur Bermutier, the Examining Magistrate, who was giving his opinion about the mysterious Saint-Cloud affair. For the past month this unsolved crime had been the talk of Paris. No one could explain it.

Monsieur Bermutier was standing with his back to the fireplace, talking. He marshalled the evidence, discussed a variety of theories, but could reach no conclusion.

Several ladies had left their chairs to get closer to him, and they remained standing, with their eyes on the magistrate's clean-shaven lips, from which fell words of the utmost gravity. They shuddered and were thrilled. That strange fear had hold of them, that avid and insatiable love of being frightened which haunts all women, and torments them like a physical hunger.

A brief silence had fallen, and one of these ladies, who looked paler than the others, broke it.

'It is positively horrifying,' she said. 'There is something almost supernatural about it. I don't suppose we shall ever know what really happened.'

The magistrate turned to her:

'That is extremely probable, Madame. But this I can tell you, that the word *supernatural*, which you have just used, is entirely out of place in this connection. We are dealing with a crime which was skilfully planned, most adroitly carried out, and so wrapped in mystery that we have completely failed to free it from the impenetrable circumstances which surround it. But I once had to inquire into an affair about which there really was an element of the fantastic. There, too, the investigation had to be abandoned, for lack of evidence.'

Several of the ladies exclaimed, with such unanimity that their voices sounded as one:

'Oh, do tell us about it!'

Monsieur Bermutier's smile was sober and serious, as the smile of an Examining Magistrate should be. He continued:

'Please do not think for a single moment that I suppose there to have been anything supernatural about the case in question. I believe only in natural causes. It would be a great deal better if we used the word 'inexplicable' rather than 'supernatural' to describe matters we know nothing of. Be that as it may, what really interested me in the occurrence I am about to describe, were the attendant, the preparatory circumstances. Here are the facts.

'At the time of which I am speaking I was Examining Magistrate at Ajaccio, a small white town standing on the shore of a lovely bay surrounded on all sides by high mountains.

'I was chiefly concerned with matters having to do with *vendetta*. This tradition of private warfare is rich in superb, infinitely dramatic, fierce and heroic incidents. It provides us with the most wonderful stories of vengeance imaginable—hatred kept alive from generation to generation, momentarily appeased but never allowed to die, stratagems of the most horrible description, murders on such a scale as to deserve the name of massacres, and almost epic deeds. For two years I heard of nothing but blood-feuds, of that terrible Corsican obsession which insists that a man must take vengeance not only on an enemy, but on his descendants and his relatives. I have known of old men, children, cousins having their throats cut in the name of that bloodstained doctrine. I have heard more stories of *vendetta* than I care to remember.

'I learned one day that an Englishman had taken the lease of a house, at the far end of the bay, for several years. He had brought with him a French servant whom he had engaged when passing through Marseilles.

'It was not long before the whole neighbourhood was buzzing with gossip about this strange character, who lived all alone in his house and never left it except to shoot and fish. He talked to nobody, never went into the town, and spent an hour or two every morning practising with a revolver and a carbine.

'He became the subject of many legends. Some said that he was a man of high rank who had fled from his country for political reasons; others, that he was hiding in order to escape the consequences of a detestable crime. People went so far as to give details of a more than usually blood-curdling nature.

'It was natural that, as an Examining Magistrate, I should

wish to find out all I could about the fellow. But to learn much turned out to be impossible. He went by the name of Sir John Rowell.

'I had to be content with keeping such watch as I could upon him, but, even so, I could discover nothing in any way suspicious in his activities.

'Since, however, rumours continued to circulate, to grow and to become widespread, I thought it my duty to make personal contact with this foreigner, and, with this end in view, I took to shooting regularly near his property. I had to wait some time for the chance I needed. But it came at last, in the form of a partridge at which I took a pot shot and happened to bring down under the very nose of the Englishman. My dog recovered it, and I went at once, with the bird in my hand, to apologize for my bad manners and to ask Sir John to accept the victim of my gun.

'He was a big man, with red hair and beard, very tall, very broad, in fact, a sort of urbane and quiet-mannered Hercules. There was nothing of the traditional British stiffness about him, and he thanked me warmly for my civility. He spoke French with an accent which undoubtedly hailed from across the Channel. By the end of a month, we had chattered together on five or six occasions.

'Then one evening, when I happened to be passing his door, I saw him sitting astride a chair in his garden, smoking his pipe. I raised my hat, and he asked me in for a glass of beer. Needless to say, I did not wait to be asked twice. He received me with scrupulous English courtesy, was loud in his praise of France and of Corsica, and declared that he had developed a great fondness for "this country" and "this stretch of coast".

'With the utmost care, and pretending a lively interest, I questioned him about his life and his plans. He showed no embarrassment, and told me that he had travelled a great deal in Africa, India, and America, adding with a laugh:

' "I have had my full share of adventures."

'Then I started to talk shooting with him, and he told me many curious details about his experiences when hunting hippopotamuses, tigers, elephants, and even gorillas.

' "Those are all very dangerous animals," I said.

'He smiled: "But there is none more dangerous than man."

'All of a sudden, he laughed outright, and his laugh was that of a solid, satisfied Englishman.

‘“I have hunted a good many men, too, in my time.”

‘Then he switched the talk to firearms, and asked me into the house to look at his collection of guns and rifles.

‘The hangings in his drawing-room were black—black silk embroidered in gold. Great yellow flowers sprawled all over the dark material, glittering like flame.

‘“It is a Japanese fabric,” he said.

‘But, in the middle of the largest panel, a strange object caught my eye. On a square of red velvet something black stood out in strong relief. I went closer. It was a hand, a human hand, not the hand of a skeleton, white and clean, but a shrivelled black hand with yellow nails. The sinews had been laid bare, and there were traces of dried blood, like a scab, on the bones, which had been cleanly severed about half way up the forearm.

‘Round the wrist was an enormous iron chain, riveted and soldered to the unsavoury limb, and attached to the wall. It looked strong enough to tether an elephant.

‘“What is that?” I asked.

‘With complete composure the Englishman replied: “That belonged to my best enemy. Comes from America—cut off with a sabre, and the skin scraped away with a sharp stone. Left to dry in the sun for eight days. It was a bit of luck for me, I can tell you.”

‘I touched the grisly relic, which must have belonged to a man of tremendous size. The abnormally long fingers were attached to enormous sinews to which, in places, strips of skin were still adhering. Flayed like that, the hand was a disgusting sight, and seemingly bore witness to some act of savage vengeance.

‘I said: “He must have been very strong.”

Very quietly, my host replied: “He was: but I was stronger. I put that chain on to hold him down.”

‘I thought he was joking, and said: “But there is no reason for the chain now. That hand isn’t going to run away!”

‘In a perfectly serious voice, Sir John Rowell said: “It was always trying to get free: I had to chain it.”

‘I shot a quick inquiring look at him. Was he, I wondered, a madman or just a practical joker?

‘But his face remained inscrutable, calm, and benignant. I changed the subject, and much admired his collection of guns.

'I noticed however, that there were three loaded revolvers lying about on various pieces of furniture, as though the man were living in constant fear of attack.

'I revisited him on several occasions. Then I stopped going. The locals had grown used to him, and nobody now gave him a thought.'

'A year went by, and then, one morning towards the end of November, my servant woke me with the news that Sir John Rowell had been murdered during the night.

'I went to the Englishman's house with the Chief Constable and the Captain of Gendarmes. The dazed and distracted valet was blubbing in front of the door. I immediately suspected him, but he was, as it turned out, innocent.

'The identity of the murderer was never established.

'On going into the drawing-room, the first thing I saw was the body of Sir John lying in the middle of the floor.

'His waistcoat was torn open, and one sleeve of the coat was hanging by a thread. There had obviously been a fierce struggle.

'The Englishman had been strangled. His black and swollen face was horrible to see and, in his eyes, there was a look of the most appalling terror. There was something between his clenched teeth, and his neck, pierced in five places by some sharp instrument, was covered in blood.

'A doctor joined us. He made a prolonged examination of the finger-marks on the dead man's neck, and then uttered these strange words:

"'Looks to me as though he'd been strangled by a skeleton!'"

'A shiver went down my back, and I looked at the wall where I had once seen that dreadful flayed hand. It was no longer there. The chain had been broken and was hanging loose.

'Then I bent over the corpse. The object between its teeth was one of the fingers of the vanished hand, but cut, or rather bitten through at the second joint.

'A search was made but without producing any new evidence. Not a door, nor a window, had been forced. None of the furniture showed signs of violence. The two watch-dogs seemed to have slept through whatever had happened.

'Here in brief, is the gist of the servant's deposition.

'For the last month, he said, his master had seemed to be uneasy and on edge. He had received a number of letters which he had thrown on the fire as soon as they arrived.

'He frequently took a hunting-crop, and, in a fit more of madness than of rage, had lashed blindly at the withered hand which, at the moment of the crime, had been spirited away from its place on the wall, no one could say how.

'He went to bed very late, and was careful to lock all the doors and windows. He always had some weapon within easy reach. He would frequently speak in a loud voice during the night. He seemed to be quarrelling with somebody.

'On the night in question, however, he made no noise, and it was only when his servant went into his room to open the shutters, that he found Sir John murdered. He could think of no possible suspect.

'I communicated all I knew about the dead man to the civil authorities and the police. The whole island was combed, but without result.

'About three months after the crime, I had a most terrifying nightmare. I dreamed that I saw that horrible hand scuttling like a scorpion or a spider along my walls and curtains. Three times I woke up: three times I fell asleep again, and three times I saw that hideous relic galloping round the room, moving its fingers like legs.

'Next morning it was brought to me. It had been found in the churchyard on Sir John Rowell's grave—for in the absence of any discoverable relative, he had been buried on the spot. The index finger was missing.

'And that, ladies, is my story. I know nothing more.'

The ladies were horror-stricken, pale, and trembling. One of them exclaimed:

'But you have suggested no solution, no explanation of the mystery! I am sure none of us will sleep unless you tell us at least what you *think* happened!'

The Magistrate smiled, but his eyes remained severe.

'I fear that, so far as dreams are concerned, I shall be a wet blanket. My theory, such as it is, is very simple, namely that the owner of the hand was not dead at all, but came to look for it. What he did, I have no idea, but I am inclined to think

that the whole affair had something to do with a *vendetta*.'

'No,' murmured one of the ladies: 'that *can't* be the explanation!'

The Magistrate, still smiling, concluded:

'I told you that you would not like my theory.'