

THE SCRAP BOOK

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THE MYSTERY.

BY GUY DE MAUPASSANT.

Specially translated for THE SCRAP BOOK by Mary K. Ford.

BERMUTHIER, the chief inspector, had a circle around him to whom he was expatiating upon the St. Cloud murder; for a month this crime had mystified all Paris—no one could make anything of it.

M. Bermuthier, with his back to the fire, was going over the testimony and discussing the different opinions, but could reach no satisfactory conclusion.

Many women were among those who surrounded the magistrate, listening intently while they shuddered at the details of the affair.

One of them, more disturbed than the others, said: "It is frightful; it borders upon the supernatural, and we shall never know the truth of it."

The magistrate turned toward her: "No, madame," he said, "we shall probably never know the whole truth. As to the supernatural, it has nothing to do with the case; but once I was obliged to follow up an affair in which there was, to say the least, a very fantastic element. I had to give up the solution of the case because of my inability to reach any satisfactory conclusion."

Several of the ladies said at once: "Oh, tell us about it!"

M. Bermuthier smiled gravely and replied: "Do not suppose for a moment that I believe there was anything supernatural in the case; but if, instead of the word 'supernatural,' we say 'inexplicable,' it will be more to the point. Here are the facts:

"I was, at that time, chief inspector at Ajaccio—a little white town charmingly situated on the water, surrounded on all sides by the mountains—studying up the

subject of the vendetta. For two years I had heard of nothing but the price of blood, of the terrible Corsican idea which makes revenge—either upon the person who has done the wrong or his immediate family—a solemn duty. I had seen old men and even children fall victims to this idea. My head was full of it.

"One day I heard that an Englishman had hired, for a term of years, a little villa at the head of the bay; with him he had brought a French servant hired at Marseilles as he passed through.

"Soon every one was talking of him—a singular individual, indeed, who lived alone with his servant, only going out to hunt and fish, spoke to no one, never went to the city, but spent an hour or more every morning in pistol-practice.

"Many stories were afloat concerning him; some said he was a political refugee of high rank; others maintained that he was in hiding after having committed a frightful crime, and even went so far as to describe it.

"In my position as inspector I wished to make some inquiries about this man, but it was impossible to learn anything of him except that his name was Sir John Rowell.

"However, as the stories about him increased instead of diminished, I resolved to try and see him for myself. With this end in view, I began to hunt regularly in his neighborhood.

"I waited a long time for an opportunity, but at last one presented itself in the form of a partridge, which I shot under my Englishman's very nose. My dog brought the bird to me, but excusing myself for my apparent rudeness, I approached Sir John and begged him to accept the game.

"He was a tall, red-haired man,



with none of the British stiffness about him, and he thanked me warmly for my politeness. At the end of a month we had met and chatted half a dozen times.

"Finally, one evening as I was passing his house, I saw him smoking in the garden. I bowed, and he asked me to come in and have a glass of beer. I didn't wait to be asked twice.

"We fell into conversation and I asked him several questions about his life; he replied without embarrassment and told me that he had traveled a good deal and had had many adventures.

"We talked of sport, and he gave me many curious details of hunting big game in the East. When I spoke of such animals as tigers and elephants being dangerous, he laughed and said: 'Oh, no! The worst is man, and I have hunted him also.'

"Then he spoke of firearms, and asked me to come in and see his collection of guns and pistols. His drawing-room was hung with black silk embroidered with gold—great yellow flowers spread over a somber field, giving the room an effect of singular brilliancy.

"But in the middle of the largest panel a strange object attracted my attention; on a square of red velvet was a dark object, standing out in bold relief. I approached to look at it—and saw a human hand. Nor was it the skeleton of a hand, white and clean, but a black hand, dry, with yellow nails, muscles laid bare and blood clotted on bones which had been cut square across in the middle of the forearm, as by a blow from an ax.

"An enormous iron chain, riveted around the wrist, attached this unsightly object to the wall by a ring strong enough to have held an elephant.

"What is that?" I asked.

"My worst enemy," replied the Englishman: "it came from America; it was cut off with a sword, skinned with a sharp stone, and dried in the sun for eight days."

"I touched the human fragment. Once, evidently, it had belonged to a giant. The fingers, unusually long, showed enormous tendons, to which morsels of skin still adhered. It seemed to tell of some savage vengeance."

"I remarked that the original owner must have been very strong.

"Yes," said Sir John tranquilly, "but I have been too strong for him; I put that chain there to hold him."

"I thought he was joking, so I said: 'The chain is useless, now; the hand will hardly escape.'

"Sir John answered gravely: 'It tries to do so constantly; the chain is necessary.'

"I glanced at his face. 'Is the man crazy, or is it merely a bad joke?' I asked myself.

"But his face was unmoved and tranquil. I spoke of other things, and admired his firearms. I also noticed three loaded revolvers about the room, as if my host lived in constant fear of an attack.

"I went several times to see him and then gradually ceased my visits. We became accustomed to his presence among us, and he was no longer remarked upon.

"A year had passed by, when one morning toward the end of November, my servant woke me to tell me that Sir John Rowell had been assassinated during the night.

"A half hour later I entered the house of the Englishman with the chief of police and the detectives. The servant, who was very excited, stood weeping before the door. At first I suspected him, but he proved his innocence.

"On entering the drawing-room, the first thing I saw was the body, extended on its back in the middle of the room.

"The shirt was torn, one sleeve hanging in shreds; everything spoke of a fearful struggle.

"The Englishman had been strangled; his face, swollen and discolored, expressed terror. He held something between his clenched teeth, and his throat, pierced with five holes, that might have been made with some pointed iron implement, was covered with blood.

"A doctor joined us. He examined at length the traces of fingers in the flesh, and then said: 'One would have said that he had been strangled by a skeleton.'

"A shudder passed over me, and I glanced toward the wall where I had formerly seen the horrible hand. It was no longer there; the chain hung broken.

"Then I bent over the dead man, and there, in that contorted mouth, I found one of the fingers of the missing relic, cut, or rather sawed off by the teeth, close to the second joint.

"Then followed investigations, but nothing was discovered; no door or window had been forced open; no furniture had been disturbed; the two watch-dogs had not wakened.

"We questioned the servant. For a month or more, he declared, his master had seemed peculiarly distraught. He had received many letters which he had burned. Often, too, he would take a riding-whip and strike in a blind fury the dried-up hand on the wall, and the hand had disappeared, no one knew how, at the very hour of the crime.

"The Englishman always went to bed very late and locked himself in; he always had firearms within reach; often, at night,

he was heard to speak aloud as if quarreling with some one; but that night, it so happened, he had made no sound, and it was only on opening the windows that the servant had found Sir John assassinated. He suspected no one.

"I communicated what I knew of the deceased to the magistrates, and a minute search was made, but with no result; nothing was discovered.

"One night, three months after the murder, I had a frightful dream; I thought I saw that horrible hand running like a spider over my walls and curtains. Three times I awoke and three times I fell asleep, only to see the hideous fragment of humanity galloping around, the fingers moving like legs.

"The next day the hand was brought to me. It had been found at the cemetery on Sir John's grave. The first finger was gone.

"That, ladies, is the story. I know nothing further."

By this time the women were pale and shuddering; one of them said: "But how do you account for it? We shall not be able to sleep unless you give us some explanation."

The magistrate smiled. "Oh, for my part, ladies, I shall certainly spoil your ideas of the supernatural; I simply think that the owner of the hand was not dead, and that he came to seek it with the hand that remained to him. But I can't conceive how he did it, who knows?—it may have been a sort of vendetta."

One of the women murmured: "No, that could not have been the case."

And M. Bermuthier, still smiling, said: "I told you that my explanation wouldn't suit you."