

The Hand

Guy De Maupassant

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They had gathered in a circle around Monsieur Bermutier, the magistrate, who was expressing his opinion of the mysterious Saint-Cloud affair. For a month this inexplicable crime had been the talk of all Paris. Nobody could make head or tail of it.

Standing with his back to the fireplace, Monsieur Bermutier was talking away, marshaling evidence, discussing the various theories, but not reaching any conclusion.

Several women had got up and drawn nearer. They stood around him, their eyes fixed on the magistrate's clean-shaven lips which were uttering such solemn words. They shuddered and trembled, thrilled by that combination of fear and curiosity, that eager and insatiable love of being frightened, which haunts the minds of women, and torments them like a hunger.

There was a moment of silence. Then one of them, paler than the others, said: "It's terrifying! It seems like something supernatural. We shall never get to the bottom of it."

The magistrate turned toward her.

"Yes, madame. We probably never shall. But as for word 'supernatural' that you've just used, it doesn't apply in this case. We are dealing with a crime that was so cleverly thought out and so cleverly carried out so thoroughly wrapped up in mystery, that we cannot disentangle it from the baffling circumstances which surround it. But I once had to deal with a case which really did seem to have something supernatural about it. We had to abandon it, as a matter of fact, because there was simply no way of clearing it up.

Several of the womenfolk suddenly exclaimed, all at the same time: "Oh, do tell us about it!"

Monsieur Bermutier smiled the serious smile which befits an investigating magistrate, and went on:

"Now you mustn't imagine for a moment that I personally give a supernatural explanation to anything in this story. I believe only in natural causes. It would much better if we simply use the word 'inexplicable' instead of the word 'supernatural' to describe what we do not understand. In any case, in the affair I am going to you about it was the circumstances which led up to it which I found so fascinating. At any rate, here are facts ...

"At that time I was the investigating magistrate in Ajaccio, a little white town situated in a wonderful bay in Corsica surrounded on all sides by high mountains.

"My particular job there was the investigation of vendettas. Some of them are sublime, ferocious, heroic incredibly dramatic. In them you come across the finest stories of revenge imaginable, hatreds that have lasted centuries dying down for a while, but never extinguished detestable trickery, murders amounting to massacre and almost becoming something they take a pride in. For two years I had heard talk of nothing else but the price of blood, and this terrible Corsican tradition which compels man who has been wronged to take his revenge on the

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man who has wronged him, and on his descendants and relations. I have seen old men, children, cousins all slaughtered. I used to have my mind filled with incidents this kind.

"Now, one day I heard that an Englishman had just a little villa at the far end of the bay and had taken a lease for several years. He had brought with him a French manservant he had taken into his service while passing through Marseilles.

"Soon everybody was taking an interest in this strange character who lived alone, and never went out except to go hunting and fishing. He never spoke to anybody, never came into town, and every morning he would spend an hour or two in shooting practice, with pistol and rifle.

"Legends began to grow around him. It was claimed that he was a person of some importance who had fled his homeland for political reasons. Then people asserted that he was in hiding because he had committed some dreadful crime. They even supplied particularly horrible details.

"In my official capacity I tried to obtain some information about this man, but I found it impossible to learn anything except that he called himself Sir John Rowell.

"So I had to remain content with keeping a close watch on him though, in fact, I had never received reports of anything suspicious concerning him.

"However, as the rumors grew worse and became more widespread, I made up my mind to see this stranger for myself, and started to make regular shooting expeditions in the neighborhood of his property.

"It was a long time before I had my opportunity, but at last it presented itself in the form of a partridge which I shot at and killed, right under the Englishman's nose, as it were. My dog brought the bird to me, but I took it straight away to Sir John Rowell and asked him to accept it, at the same time apologizing for having disturbed him with my shooting.

"He was a big man with red hair and a red beard, tall and broad-shouldered, a sort of calm, well-mannered giant. He had none of the so-called British stiffness, and he thanked me warmly for being so civil, speaking with a strong English accent. During the following month we chatted together five or six times.

"Then one evening, as I was passing his gate, I saw him smoking his pipe, sitting astride a chair in the garden. I greeted him, and he invited me into the garden to drink a glass of beer. I didn't need asking twice!

"He greeted me with all the meticulous courtesy typical of the English, was full of praise for France and Corsica and said, in very bad French, how fond he was of 'cette pays' (this country)

and 'cette rivage' (this stretch of coast).

"Then I began to inquire about his past life and his plans for the future, asking my questions very tactfully and making a show of genuine interest in his affairs. He replied without any sign of embarrassment, and told me that he had traveled a good deal in Africa, India and America. He added, with a laugh, 'I've had plenty of adventures. I have indeed!'

"When I brought the conversation back to the subject of hunting he began to tell me all sorts of interesting things about the hunting of hippos, tigers, elephants and even gorillas.

"Those are all fearful brutes,' I said.

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"Oh, no!" he said, with a smile. "The worst brute of all is man!" And he gave the hearty laugh of a big, genial Englishman, then he added: 'I've often hunted man, too.'

"Then he began to talk about guns and he invited me to come into the house and see the various types of guns he had.

"His drawing room was draped in black black silk, embroidered with big golden flowers which were scattered over the somber material, gleaming like flames.

"The silk is from Japan,' he said.

"But in the middle of the largest panel a strange object attracted my attention: it was black and stood out clearly against a square of red velvet. I went up to it. It was a hand, a human hand not the hand of a skeleton, all white and clean, but a black, withered hand, with yellow nails, exposed muscles, and with traces of congealed blood, looking like dirt. The bones had been chopped off at about the middle of the forearm, as though they had been severed by an axe.

"An enormous iron chain was riveted and welded into the wrist of this filthy limb, and at the other end was attached to the wall by a ring strong enough to hold an elephant.

"I asked him: 'What's that?'

"The Englishman calmly replied: 'That's my worst enemy. It came from America. It was chopped off with a saber, skinned with a sharp bit of stone, and then dried in the sun for a week.

And a damn good job it was, too!"

"I touched this human relic. It must have belonged to a man of gigantic size. The fingers, which were abnormally long, were held in place by enormous tendons which had fragments of skin still clinging to them. The hand flayed like this was a frightening thing to see. You could not help thinking that it was the result of some barbaric act of vengeance.

"I remarked: 'This man must have been very strong.'

"The Englishman replied in a gentle voice: 'Oh, yes. But I was stronger than he was. I fixed that chain on his hand to prevent it from escaping.'

"I thought he must be joking, so I said: 'That chain won't be much use now. The hand won't run away!'

"Sir John Rowell then said in a very serious voice: 'It's always trying to get away. That chain is necessary.'

"I took a quick glance at his face, saying to myself: 'Is the fellow a madman or a practical joker?'

"But his face remained inscrutable, with its placid, benevolent expression. So I changed the subject and began to admire his guns.

"I noticed, however, that three loaded revolvers had been placed on various items of furniture, as if this were living in constant fear of being attacked.

"I made several more visits to his home, and then I stopped going there. We had become accustomed to his presence, and people now paid little attention to him.

"A whole year went by. Then, one morning, toward the end of November, my servant woke me with the news that Sir John Rowell had been murdered during the night.

"Half an hour later I was entering the Englishman's house along with the chief magistrate and the captain of the local police. Sir John's manservant bewildered and in despair, was standing at the door in tears. At first I suspected this man but he turned out to be innocent. We never did discover who the murderer was.

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"When I entered Sir John's drawing room the first thing I saw was the corpse lying on its back in the middle of the room.

"His waistcoat had been torn; a sleeve of his jacket had been ripped away; everything pointed to the fact that a terrible struggle had taken place.

"The Englishman had been choked to death! His face was black and swollen a terrifying sight and the expression on it suggested that he had experienced the most appalling horror.

There was something between his tightly clenched teeth, and in his neck, which was covered with blood, there were five puncture marks. They looked as though they had been made by fingers of iron.

"A doctor arrived. He spent a long time examining the imprints of the fingers in the flesh, and then came out with the strange remark: You'd think he'd been strangled by a skeleton!"

"A shudder ran down my spine, and immediately I looked at the place on the wall where I had previously seen the horrible flayed hand. It was no longer there. The broken chain was hanging down. "Then I bent over the corpse. In his twisted mouth I found one of the fingers of the missing hand. It had been cut off or rather sawn off by the dead man's teeth exactly at the second joint.

"We got on with our investigations. But we could discover nothing. No door or window had been forced, nothing had been broken into. The two guard dogs had not even wakened.

"Very briefly, this is the statement made by the servant. He said that for the past month his master had seemed very upset. He had received a lot of letters which he had burned as soon as they arrived. Often he had picked up a horsewhip and, in a display of anger which bordered on insanity, he had furiously beaten that withered hand, which had been riveted to the wall and which had, somehow or other, been removed at the very hour crime was committed. Sir John used to go to bed very late and he would carefully lock all the doors and windows. He always kept firearms within easy reach. Often, at night, he had been heard talking in a loud voice, as though he were quarreling with someone . . .

"On that particular night, as it happens, he had not made a sound, and it was only when he came to open the windows the next morning that the servant had found Sir John lying there, murdered. There was nobody this servant could think of as a suspect.

"I told the magistrates and police officers everything I knew about the dead man, and the most detailed inquiries were made over the whole island. Nothing was discovered.

"Now, one night, three months after the murder, I had a dreadful nightmare. I thought I saw the hand, the horrible hand, running like a scorpion, or a spider, all over the curtains and walls of my room. Three times I woke up, three times I fell asleep again, three times I saw hideous human relic crawling rapidly around my bedroom, using its fingers as a creature uses its legs.

"In the morning this hand was brought to me. They had found it in the cemetery, lying on Sir John's grave. He had been buried on the island because they had not been able to trace his family. The hand had the index finger missing.

"Well, ladies. There's my story. That's all I know."

The women who had been listening were horrified, and looked pale and trembling. One of them exclaimed: "But that's not a proper ending! You haven't given us an explanation! We shall not be able to get to sleep tonight unless you tell us your opinion of what really happened."

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The magistrate gave his austere smile: "Oh, ladies, I'm afraid I am going to deprive you of your nightmares! I imply think that the lawful owner of the hand was still alive, and that he came to get back his severed hand by rising the one that remained. The only thing is, I just haven't been able to find out how he did it. It was obviously a sort of vendetta."

One of the women murmured: "No, that can't be the real explanation." And the magistrate, still smiling, finally remarked: "Well, I warned you my theory wouldn't satisfy you!"