

Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893), "A Ghost" (1890)

We were talking of Processes of Sequestration, apropos of a recent law-case. It was towards the end of a friendly evening, in an ancient mansion in the Rue de Grenelle, and each one had his story, his story which he affirmed to be true.

Then the old Marquis de la Tour-Samuel, who was eighty-two years old, rose, and went and leaned upon the mantle-piece. He said, with a voice which shook a little:

"I too, I know a strange story, so strange that it has simply possessed my life. It is fifty-six years since that adventure happened, yet not a month passes without my seeing it all again in dreams. That day has left a mark, an imprint of fear, stamped on me, do you understand? Yes, for ten minutes I suffered such horrible terror that from that hour to this a sort of constant dread has rested on my soul. Unexpected noises make me tremble all over, objects which in the shades of evening I do not well distinguish cause me a mad desire to escape. The fact is, I am afraid of the night.

"No! I admit I should never have confessed this before arriving at my present age. But I can say what I like now. When a man is eighty-two years old it is permitted him to be afraid of imaginary dangers. And in the face of real ones I have never drawn back, *mesdames*.

"The affair so disturbed my spirit, and produced in me so profound, so mysterious, so dreadful a sense of trouble, that I have never even told it. I have kept it in the intimate recesses of my heart; in that corner where we hide our bitter and our shameful secrets, and all those unspeakable stories of weaknesses which we have committed but which we cannot confess.

"I shall tell you the tale exactly as it happened, without trying to explain it. Certainly it can be explained—unless we assume that for an hour I was mad. But no, I was not mad, and I will give you the proof of it. Imagine what you like. Here are the plain facts:

"It was in the month of July, 1827. I found myself in garrison at Rouen.

"One thy, as I was taking a walk upon the quay, I met a man whom I thought I recognized, although I did not remember exactly who he might be. I instinctively made a motion to stop. The stranger noticed the gesture, looked at me, and fell into my arms.

"It was a friend of my youth whom I had once loved dearly. The five years since I had seen him seemed to have aged him fifty. His hair was quite white; and when he walked he stooped as if exhausted. He understood my surprise, and told me about his life. He had been broken by a terrible sorrow.

"He had fallen madly in love with a very young girl, and he had married her with a kind of joyful ecstasy. But after one single year of superhuman happiness, she had suddenly died of a trouble at the heart, slain, no doubt, by love itself.

"He had left his château the very day of the funeral, and had come to reside in his hotel at Rouen. He was now living there, solitary and desperate, preyed on by anguish, and so miserable that his only thought was suicide.

"'Now that I've found you again,' said he, 'I shall ask you to do me a great service. It is to go out to the château and bring me some papers of which I stand in urgent need. They are in the secretary in my room, in *our* room. I cannot intrust this commission to an inferior, or to a man of business, because I desire impenetrable discretion and absolute silence. And as to myself, I would not go back to that house for anything in the world.

I will give you the key of that chamber, which I closed myself when I went away. And I will give you the key of the secretary. Besides that, you shall have a line from me to my gardener, which will make you free of the château. But come and breakfast with me to-morrow, and we can talk about all that'

"I promised to do him this service. It was indeed a mere excursion for me, since his estate lay only about five leagues from Rouen, and I could get there on horseback in an hour.

"I was with him at ten o'clock the next morning. We breakfasted alone together, yet he did not say twenty words. He begged me to forgive him for his silence. The thought of the visit which I was about to make to that chamber where his happiness lay dead, overwhelmed him completely, said he to me. And for a fact, he did seem strangely agitated and preoccupied, as if a mysterious struggle were passing in his

"Finally, however, he explained to me exactly what I must do. It was quite simple. I must secure two packages of letters and a bundle of papers which were shut up in the first drawer on the right of the desk of which I had the key. He added:

“I don't need to ask you not to look at them.’

“I was almost wounded by this, and I told him so a little hotly. He stammered:

“‘Forgive me, I suffer so much.’

“And he fell to weeping.

“I left him about one o'clock, to accomplish my mission..

“It was brilliant weather, and I trotted fast across the fields, listening to the songs of the larks and the regular ring of my sabre on my boot

“Next I entered the forest and walked my horse. Branches of trees caressed my face; and sometimes I would catch a leaf in my teeth, and chew it eagerly, in one of those ecstasies at being alive which fill you, one knows not why, with a tumultuous and almost elusive happiness, with a kind of intoxication of strength.

“On approaching the château, I looked in my pocket for the note which I had for the gardener, and I found to my astonishment that it was sealed. I was so surprised and irritated that I came near returning at once, without acquitting myself of my errand. But I reflected that I should in that case display a susceptibility which would be in bad taste. And, moreover, in his trouble, my friend might have sealed the note unconsciously.

“The manor looked as though it had been deserted these twenty years. How the gate, which was open and rotten, held up, was hard to tell. Grass covered the walks. You no longer made out the borders of the lawn.

“At the noise which I made by kicking a shutter with my foot, an old man came out of a side door and seemed stupefied at the sight. I leaped to the ground and delivered my letter. He read it, read it again, turned it round, looked at me askance, put the paper in his pocket, and remarked:

“‘Well! What do you want?’

“I answered, sharply:

“‘You ought to know, since you have received the orders of your master in that letter. I want to enter the château.’

“He seemed overwhelmed. He said:

“‘So, you are going into. . . into his room?’

“I began to grow impatient

“‘*Parbleu!* But do you mean to put me through an examination, my good man?’

“He stammered:

“‘No... monsieur ... only ...it has not been opened since ...since the ...death. If you will wait five minutes, I will go. ..go and see whether...’

“I interrupted him, angrily:

“‘Come, come! Are you playing with me? You know you can't get in. I have the key.’

“He had nothing more to say.

“‘Well, monsieur, I will show you the way.’

“‘Show me the staircase, and leave me alone. I shall find the room well enough without you.’

“‘But ... monsieur ...but ...’

“This time I went fairly into a rage:

“‘Be quiet! do you hear? Or you will have to reckon with me.’

“I pushed him violently aside, and I penetrated into the house.

“First I crossed the kitchen, then two little rooms inhabited by the fellow and his wife. I next passed into a great hall, I climbed the stairs, and I recognized the door as indicated by my friend.

“I opened it without trouble, and entered.

“The room was so dark that at first I hardly made out anything. I paused, struck by that mouldy and lifeless odor so peculiar to apartments which are uninhabited and condemned, and, as you might say, dead. Then, little by little, my eyes became accustomed to the gloom, and I saw, clearly enough, a great apartment all in disorder, the bed without sheets, yet with its mattress and its pillows, one of which bore the deep impress of an elbow or a head, as if some one had just lain on it.

“The chairs seemed all in confusion. I noticed that a door (into a closet, no doubt) had remained half open.

“I went first to the window to let in some light, and I opened it, but the iron fastenings of the outside shutter were so rusty that I could not make them yield.

“I even tried to break them with my sabre, but without success. And as I was growing angry at these useless efforts, and as my eyes had at last perfectly accustomed themselves to the darkness, I gave up the hope of seeing more clearly, and I went to the desk.

“I seated myself in an arm-chair, lowered the shelf, and opened the indicated drawer. It was

full to the top. I needed only three packets, which I knew how to tell. And I set myself to looking.

"I was straining my eyes to decipher the inscriptions, when behind me I thought I heard a slight rustle. I paid no heed to it, thinking that a current of air had made some of the hangings stir. But, in a minute, another almost imperceptible movement caused a singular, unpleasant little shiver to pass over my skin. It was so stupid to be even in the least degree nervous that I would not turn round, being ashamed for myself in my own presence. I had then just discovered the second of the bundles which I wanted. And now, just as I lit upon the third, the breath of a great and painful sigh against my shoulder caused me to give one mad leap two yards away. In my start I had turned quite round, with my hand upon my sabre, and if I had not felt it by my side I should certainly have run like a coward.

"A tall woman dressed in white stood looking at me from behind the arm-chair in which, a second before, I had been sitting.

"Such a shudder ran through my limbs that I almost fell backward! Oh, no one who has not felt it can understand a dreadful yet foolish fear like that. The soul fairly melts away; you are conscious of a heart no longer; the whole body becomes as lax as a sponge; and you would say that everything within you was falling to pieces.

"I do not believe in ghosts at all.—Well, I tell you that at that moment I grew faint under the hideous fear of the dead. And from the irresistible anguish caused by supernatural terrors I suffered, oh, I suffered in a few seconds more than I have done all the rest of my life.

"If she had not spoken I should perhaps have died! But she did speak; she spoke in a sweet and dolorous voice which made my nerves quiver. I should not venture to say that I became master of myself and that I recovered my reason. No. I was so frightened that I no longer knew what I was doing; but a kind of personal dignity which I have in me, and also a little professional pride, enabled me to keep up an honorable countenance almost in spite of myself. I posed for my own benefit, and for hers, no doubt—for hers, woman or spectre, whatever she might be. I analyzed all this later, because, I assure you, that at the instant of the apparition I did not do much thinking. I was afraid.

"She said:

"Oh, monsieur, you can do me a great service!"

"I tried to answer, but it was simply impossible for me to utter a word. A vague sound issued from my throat.

"She continued:

"Will you do it? You can save me, cure me. I suffer dreadfully. I suffer, oh, I suffer!"

"And she sat down gently in my armchair. She looked at me:

"Will you do it?"

"I made the sign 'yes' with my head, for my voice was gone.

"Then she held out to me a tortoise-shell comb and she murmured:

"Comb my hair oh, comb my hair! That will cure me. They must comb my hair. Look at my head. How I suffer! And my hair, how it hurts me!"

"Her hair, which was loose and long and very black (as it seemed to me), hung down over the arm-chair's back and touched the ground.

"Why did I do that? Why, all shivering, did I receive the comb? And why did I take into my hands that long hair, which gave my skin a feeling of atrocious cold, as if I were touching serpents? I do not know.

"That feeling still clings about my fingers. And when I think of it I tremble.

"I combed her. I handled, I know not how, that icy hair. I twisted it. I bound it and unbound it. I plaited it as we plait a horse's mane. She sighed, bent her head, seemed happy.

"Suddenly she said to me, 'I thank you!' caught the comb out of my hands, and fled through the half open door which I had noticed.

"For several seconds after I was left alone, I experienced that wild trouble of the soul which one feels after a nightmare from which one has just awakened. Then at last I recovered my senses; I ran to the window, and I broke the shutters open with violent blows.

"A flood of daylight entered. I rushed upon the door by which she had disappeared. I found it shut and immovable.

"Then a fever of flight seized on me, a panic, a real panic such as overcomes an army. I caught up roughly the three packets of letters from the open desk; I crossed the room at a run; I took the steps of the staircase four at a time; I found myself outside, I don't know how; and, perceiving my horse ten paces off, I mounted him with one leap and went off at full gallop.

“I did not pause till I was before the door of my lodgings in Rouen. Throwing the reins to my orderly, I escaped to my room, where I locked myself in to think.

“And then for an hour I kept anxiously asking whether I had not been the sport of some hallucination. I had certainly had one of those incomprehensible nervous shocks, one of those affections of the brain which dwarf the miracles to which the supernatural owes its power.

“And I had almost come to believe it was a delusion, an error of my senses, when I drew near the window, and my eyes lit by chance upon my breast.

My dolman was covered with long woman’s hairs which had rolled themselves around the buttons!

“I took them one by one and I threw them out of the window, with trembling in my fingers.

“Then I called my orderly. I felt too much moved, too much troubled, to go near my friend that day. And I wished also to ponder carefully what I should say to him about all this.

“I had the letters taken to his house. He gave the soldier a receipt. He asked many questions about me, and my soldier told him that I was unwell; that I had had a sunstroke—something. He seemed uneasy.

“I went to him the next thy, early in the morning, having resolved to tell him the truth. He had gone out the evening before, and had not come back.

“I returned in the course of the day. They had seen nothing of him. I waited a week He did not reappear. Then I informed the police. They searched for him everywhere without discovering a trace of his passing or of his final retreat.

“A minute inspection of the abandoned château was instituted. Nothing suspicious was discovered.

“No sign that a woman had been hidden there revealed itself.

“The inquiry proving fruitless, the search was interrupted.

“And for fifty-six years I have learned nothing. I know nothing more.”