

The Skeleton Hand

By Agnes MacLeod

I am about to relate some events which took place in the early part of this century, in a remote little fishing village on the south coast of Devonshire. The occurrences are themselves so remarkable that they have been well known to the present generation of inhabitants; but as things get altered in oral transmission through many persons, it has been thought well to place this record in writing.

Near the village of Jodziel, in a pretty little cottage on the top of the bright red sandstone cliff which overhangs the village, lived two maiden sisters, the Misses Rutson. Their father, a sea-captain, had died a year before the events I am about to relate occurred. Their mother had died in giving birth to the younger sister, Anne, who was now a most beautiful girl of eighteen. The Misses Rutson were very devotedly attached to one another, and were much beloved by the village neighbours. The hamlet being a very sequestered one, they seldom saw any one from the outer world except occasionally sailors, who would stroll along the cliff from Plymouth or from other fishing villages along the coast. In the autumn of 1813 a pressgang visited South Devon and made their headquarters for some time in the village of Jodziel. The captain, a certain Captain Sinclair by name—a coarse brutal fellow in appearance—was very much struck by the extraordinary beauty of Miss Anne. He forced himself upon her, and continued paying her the most distasteful attentions, which the gentle girl did her very utmost to check, but in vain. The day before Captain Sinclair left Jodziel, he made a formal offer of marriage to Miss Anne, which in the presence of her sister she immediately and decisively declined. Captain Sinclair flew into the most violent passion, swore he had never been thwarted yet by any woman, and that she should belong to him or never marry at all. Anne was so much upset by the terrible scene, and by Captain Sinclair's outrageous language, that her sister was very glad when an invitation from an aunt residing in London gave Anne a few weeks' much-needed change. Mrs Travers was the only near relative remaining to the Misses Rutson, and owing to various circumstances the sisters had seen but little of their aunt, though with Maurice Travers, her only son, they were better acquainted. Maurice's regiment had been quartered for the summer of 1813 at Plymouth, and he had frequently been over to see his cousins, and many a pleasant summer day had they spent wandering along the beautiful Devonshire coast. Miss Rutson had not been slow to perceive that stronger attractions than those of mere scenery brought the young officer so constantly to their cottage, and she was not therefore very much surprised at receiving one morning, about three weeks after Anne's departure from home, a letter announcing her engagement to her cousin, Maurice Travers, and her immediate return to Jodziel. It was decided that the marriage should take place early in the following May, and I will now quote one or two passages from Miss Rutson's diary at this time.

*'May 1—*Such a horrid meeting we have just had. Anne and I had been for a stroll along the shore when we noticed a little boat which lay drawn up under a rock at some distance, and Anne's eyes, which are keener than mine, caught sight of the name painted in gold letters. "Ah, sister, come away," she cried; "it is a boat from the Raven. I thought Captain Sinclair was not to be in these waters again; he told me he was to sail for the West Indies last month." We turned, and were hurriedly retracing our steps towards the house when we heard a cry of *Stop!* I looked at Anne; she was deadly white. "Run on quick," I cried; "I will speak to him." My heart was

beating so fast I could run no longer; besides, I felt it might be well to hear what Captain Sinclair had to say, so I drew myself together and waited. Presently he appeared clambering up the side of the cliff, his swarthy face purple with excitement. "Where is she?" he gasped. "I have come back to fetch her; I could not sail without her, my own beautiful Anne!" "Recollect yourself; sir," I cried indignantly. "How dare you speak of my sister in this free manner! She has told you most clearly, and that in my presence, that she looks on your pursuit of her as odious, and she begs, both for her own sake and yours, that you will never attempt to see her again." "Do you think I will be daunted by such a speech from a foolish girl?" he answered scornfully; "No, no, she shall be mine yet, whether she will or no." "You are mistaken," I replied as calmly as I could; "Next Monday she marries our first cousin, Maurice Travers, and will be at peace from your hated persecutions."

'I shall never forget his scowl of fury as he turned from me and dashed down the cliff shouting as he did so, "She shall be mine!" When I got home, feeling very nervous and shaken, who should I find just starting to seek me but Maurice, who had come three days earlier than we expected him. An hour before I should have felt very cross at having my last quiet hours with Anne so much curtailed, but now I was only too thankful to feel we had a protector near us. He went out after hearing my story, but could see no trace of either boat or its owner.

'May 2—To my great relief the Raven, with Captain Sinclair on board, has left Plymouth this morning for the West Indies. Maurice had business at Plymouth, and he took the opportunity of making inquiries concerning the Raven, which was, he found, in the very act of putting to sea. I feel, oh, so thankful and relieved.

'May 4—How shall I ever begin to write the events of this most dreadful day! Such a brilliant sunshiny morning, quite like summer, and my darling came down looking like one of the sweet white roses which were just coming into bloom around the windows. I plucked a beautiful spray of them, and she put them in her white satin waistband just before starting for church. I have those roses by me now as I write, but, O my darling! where are you? The wedding was a very quiet one. After the ceremony we had the clergyman and doctor, with their wives and their children, to lunch, and presently Anne rose and said she would go and change her dress. I was going to follow her, but she stopped me with one of her sweet kisses and said, "Let me have a few moments alone in the old room to say goodbye to it all." I let her go—when did I ever thwart her in anything? She went, and Maurice began romping with the children, and we ladies cut slices of wedding-cake, to be taken round to village favourites next day, and still Anne did not call. Once, indeed, I had fancied I heard her voice; but when I had gone upstairs her door was locked, and she had not answered my gentle tap, so I came down again, not wishing to intrude upon her privacy. At length, however, Maurice became impatient, and said I must go and fetch her down, or they would never be in time to catch the coach at Plymouth. The door was still locked. When I got upstairs I knocked, first gently, then more loudly. I was not frightened at first, for there was a door-window in the room leading down a little flight of steps into the garden, and I thought she had gone down these to take a last look at her flowers, so I called to Maurice to run round to the garden, for she must be there. I remained listening at the bedroom door, which in a moment or two flew open and Maurice, with a very disturbed face, stood before me. "She has evidently been in the garden," he said, "for the door on to the outside steps was open; but there is no one there now." I made no answer, but flew past him into the bedroom. It needed but a glance to show my darling had gone straight through the room; her gloves and handkerchief were thrown on a chair by the window, and her pale-blue travelling-dress lay undisturbed upon the bed. I ran hastily through the room and garden, which was empty; the gate

on to the cliff was ajar, and we noticed (but not till later) that there must have been a struggle at the spot, for some of the lilac boughs were torn down, as if someone had held fast by them and been dragged forcibly away. Maurice and the rest of the party followed me on to the cliff, for the alarm had now become general; for a little while we ran wildly, calling her dear name, but presently Maurice came to me, and drawing my arm within his own, led me back towards the house. "Someone must be here to receive her when she comes home," he said gently, and here his lips grew white. "It might be well to have her bed ready in case—" He was out of the room without finishing his sentence. It was needless; the same horrible fear had already seized on me. The cliff, the terrible cliff, I cannot go on writing, my heart is too heavy.

'Twelve o'clock—They have come back, and, O God! the only trace of her is the spray of white roses I picked for her this morning. They were found on top of the cliff about half a mile from here. I think they are a message from my darling to me, for they were not trampled on or crushed; she must have taken them carefully and purposely from her belt; they shall never, never leave me.

'May 11—It is a week since that dreadful day, and not the smallest clue to her disappearance. Poor Maurice is half mad with grief; he has sought for her high and low, and spent all the little sum destined for their wedding journey on these vain researches. Now he wanders along the cliff up and down, up and down, the whole of the long day, and then he comes and sits opposite to me with his elbows on his knees, till I tell him it is time for bed, when he goes without a word; but I hear him pacing his room half the night.

'May 31—Maurice has had to join his regiment for foreign service. I am glad: he would have gone mad had he remained inactive here.

'Sept. 3—I have been very ill, but Patty assures me there has not been a trace of any clue during my long time of blessed unconsciousness, and now the terrible aching void is again here. O my darling, my darling, come back!

'Sept. 6—Why should I go on writing? my life henceforth is only waiting.'

After this comes a long break of fully twenty years in the diary; then in an aged and trembling character occurs the following entry:

'May 4, 1835—I don't know, what impels me once more to pen this diary; possibly this wild hurricane of wind which is making the house rock like a boat has upset me, but I feel so glad and satisfied, as if my long waiting were nearly over. I have just been upstairs to see that all is in order for my darling. We have kept everything aired and prepared for her these thirty years, so that she should find all comfortable when she comes home at last. My poor darling, she will only find Patty and me to welcome her. Let me think, this is nearly twenty years ago since we heard of Maurice's death at Waterloo. Oh what a fearful crash! and how that rumbling noise goes on sounding as if the cliff had given way.

Here the diary abruptly terminates; but the remainder of the tragic story is yet told in that little Devonshire village. The violence of the storm had in very truth caused a subsidence in the cliff, and in doing so had brought to light a skeleton on which yet hung some tattered remnants of what had once been white satin, and from whose bony fingers rolled a tarnished wedding-ring. The bones were collected with tender care and brought to the house of the unhappy sister. She received them without much apparent surprise, directed they should be laid on 'Miss Anne's bed upstairs,' and as soon as the men had left the house, went and laid herself upon the bed also, where her faithful maid Patty, coming to see after her an hour later, found her stone-dead, and held tight in her dead grasp was a pair of white gloves and a lace pocket-handkerchief.

The two sisters were laid to rest in one grave, and it was not till after the funeral was over that it was discovered that, through some inadvertence, one of the skeleton hands had not been placed in the coffin with the rest of the body.

At first there was some talk of reopening the grave, but the old maid Patty entreated so earnestly to be allowed to retain the hand that she at last succeeded in carrying her point. A glass case was made by Mrs Patty's order, and in it the poor hand was placed; and when Mrs Patty went down to the inn to spend her last remaining years with her daughter the landlady, the case was placed on a shelf close to the old woman's seat, and many a time would she recount the sad story to the sailors who frequented the village inn.

In the spring of 1837 a larger number than usual were gathered round the fireside of the Blue Dragon. A fearful storm, accompanied by violent gusts of hail, swept round the house. Suddenly the door burst open, and a young man entered, half dragging, half supporting an old man, bent and shrunk with age and infirmity. 'Here you are, sir,' he said to the old man; 'This is the Blue Dragon. You won't find a snugger berth between here and Plymouth'; so saying, he thrust the old man into a chair by the fire, and continued, half aside to the company. 'Found the old cove wandering about the cliffs, and thought he would be blown over, so offered to guide him here. I think he is a little—' and he tapped his forehead significantly. The rest of the party turned round curiously to gaze at the stranger, who, seeming to wake from some reverie, proceeded to order something hot both for himself and his self-constituted guide. The hot gin-and-water seemed further to rouse him, and he began asking a few questions concerning the country and neighbourhood; but in the very act of speaking his attention was suddenly arrested by the sight of the glass case and skeleton hand. He sprang from his chair with a savage cry of mingled terror and dismay. 'The hand,' he cried, 'the hand! why does it point at me? I never meant, O God!—' and he fell down in a fit, rolling and gasping on the floor, and shrieking wildly at intervals, 'The hand, the hand!' They raised the wretched man from the floor and laid him on a bed, whilst the doctor was hurriedly summoned. Meanwhile the sufferer continued disjointed mutterings, till, becoming exhausted, he sank into a stupor. On the doctor's arrival, however, he once more roused himself; and asked in a quieter and more composed manner whose the hand was. On being told, he trembled violently, but said: 'I am Captain Sinclair; I knew the wedding-day; I told my ship to sail without me from Plymouth, saying I would rejoin her at Falmouth. I meant to bring Anne with me; I hid in the garden, she came into it alone, I rushed forward, threw a shawl I had ready over her head, and carried her away; she resisted with all her might, but I was a strong man, and her cries were stifled by the shawl. Of course I could not get along very fast, and presently I heard voices of those in search of her. She heard them also, and made another frantic effort to free herself. My strength was nearly exhausted, but mad with rage and disappointment, I drew my knife from my belt and stabbed her to the heart, crying fiercely, "I have kept my oath, you shall never be another's." Then I hurled the body down the cliff where I saw it catch in a crevice of the rock. O God!' he cried, shuddering and covering his face with his hands, 'I see it now—that dreadful scene, the blue waves dancing beneath the brilliant sunshine, and that white shapeless mass caught in the frowning cliff with one arm sticking stiffly upwards. I rolled down one or two stones, endeavouring to conceal it; and when I left the spot, all I could see was a hand pointing at me.' Here the miserable wretch broke off with a deep groan. In a moment more he sprang up with another wild shout of 'The hand, the bloody hand!' and so shrieking, his body fell lifeless to the ground. . . The skeleton hand in the adjoining room was dripping blood.