

THE KEEPER OF HANDS

A Viennese Mysteries Novel

J. Sydney Jones



This first world edition published 2013
in Great Britain and in the USA by
SEVERN HOUSE PUBLISHERS LTD of
19 Cedar Road, Sutton, Surrey, England, SM2 5DA.
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Jones, J. Sydney.

The keeper of hands.

1. Werthen, Karl (Fictitious character)—Fiction.
2. Murder—Investigation—Fiction. 3. Prostitutes—
Austria—Vienna—Fiction. 4. Lawyers—Austria—Vienna—
Fiction. 5. Vienna (Austria)—Social conditions—20th
century—Fiction. 6. Detective and mystery stories.

I. Title

813.6-dc23

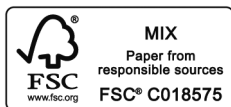
ISBN-13: 978-0-7278-8269-1 (cased)

For old friends, Tom Ovens and Jim Barry

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Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd.,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire, Scotland.
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
MPG Books Ltd., Bodmin, Cornwall.

PROLOGUE

Vienna, May Day, 1901

Sometimes he fancied himself a character from one of Schnitzler's early dramas: Anatol, the Lothario who is ever on the prowl for a sweet young thing.

He sported a thin moustache and the neatly oiled and brushed hair of such a womanizer, carried a walking stick, and dressed to the nines even on days when he did not feel particularly compelled to join the hunt.

A fellow has to keep up appearances, even if there is no one to appreciate the effort.

Today, however, there most definitely was a woman to impress. It was May Day – and a bright and cheery day it was, he thought.

He had seen her throwing flowers to those red-nosed rowdies carrying socialist banners at the head of the parade. Silly young thing, she could hardly understand the politics she was thus espousing. He would take her in hand, educate her in the ways of the world, and get that socialist claptrap out of her mind.

The horse-chestnut trees were in full bloom along the Prater-Allee, their white-and-pink blossoms dazzling. Even the red sashes the paraders wore diagonally across their chests were luminescent today.

A fine day for the chase.

She was exactly the sort he fancied: petite, with luxuriant black ringlets spilling out under her hat. Her face was all expectation, a full-lipped mouth making an 'O', eyes open wide. Her nose was a pixyish thing, tiny and twitching like a small forest creature sniffing its way home.

He gave her a name: Gretchen. It was as good as any other, and Goethe might well approve. Gretchen's hands, holding the last of the carnations, were pink and chapped. A worker then; it was clearly her special day off.

He inched his way through the crowds to the kerbside, next to his chosen one. He could almost smell her now, feel the warmth coming from her young, ripe body.

It was as if this Gretchen sensed his presence. She turned slowly, and her face in silhouette was a thing of beauty – tiny ears like mollusc shells, small creases at her neck as she rotated her head.

Yes, he decided. She would be his before the day was out.

Her eyes fixed on him.

‘Back off, will you?’ she said in a croaking voice full of working-class coarseness and rebuke.

In the end, he settled for a woman not quite so lovely as his Gretchen, but fetching just the same. A few years past her prime, perhaps, but then his blood was up and the parade was winding down. He had to be quick about it or miss his chance.

He admired her hat and they struck up a conversation; he bought her an ice, told her of his travels and his important work. Actually, though he did travel a good deal, he had no work, important or otherwise. No need to, with his family annuity.

Anna was her name, out for the day from Brigittenau. Due back by five.

Yes, there was time, but not enough for subtlety and play.

He steered her towards the forested section of the Prater, taking her on a seeming nature walk, indicating a chestnut tree here, a linden there. He raised a manicured forefinger at a plover flying overhead; nodded at a delicate St John’s wort underfoot, its yellow flower warding off evil.

Little good that would do his Anna, he thought.

They had left the paths now, and quite suddenly he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her on the mouth. She struggled for a moment.

‘What sort of girl do you think I am?’ she said with what he knew to be feigned outrage.

‘This sort,’ he said, giving her bottom a pinch.

That made her giggle; a bit of her spittle landed on his lower lip.

They were well out of sight of anyone, and he hurriedly tugged off his jacket, spreading it on the ground.

But she did not reciprocate.

‘Quickly,’ he urged. Then he added more coaxingly, ‘My sweet dove.’

Looking at her face, he realized that she had no intention of pleasing him. In fact, she was about to scream; he saw it building on her face like an infant that has just injured itself. She was not looking at him. No; her eyes were diverted to his left. He followed

the glance. And then, as her scream tore through the idyllic softness of the day, he saw it, too.

There, thrust under a low bit of brush, was the body of a young woman, the sort to whom he was normally attracted. She was quite naked, her limbs and torso of a startling whiteness in contrast to the deep woodland greens all around. The right arm was pinned under the body, the left thrown up over the head as if in abandon.

By the look of the purple bruising around her throat and the thick knot of tongue poking out of her mouth, she was dead.

PART ONE

ONE

Advokat Karl Werthen was surveying his demesne. Only to himself did he dare think of this smallholding in the Vienna Woods as a manorial estate. Were he to use the word demesne with his wife, Berthe, to describe their summer home, she would of course voice full-throated laughter.

Yet, when she referred to it as their 'cottage', Werthen never thought of chiding her. Cottage was the term given to elegant villas on the edges of the woods by Viennese who identified too much with British understatement.

So, alone behind the old farmhouse in the village of Laab im Walde, Werthen surveyed his 'demesne', appreciating in particular the white and violet lilacs tumbling in natural bouquets of bloom in the overgrown bushes to the rear of the farmhouse. Their scent filled the air though he was a good thirty metres from them.

Behind him, at the limits of his property, which locals called simply 'the farm', he heard the chuffing exertions of Stein, finishing the rolling of the last section of fresh brown earth. A small man, Stein was strong as a mule, pushing the large roller in front of him over the tilled ground. He would plant the seed before leaving.

Stein was steward of Hohelände, Werthen's family estate in Lower Austria. In fact, this tennis court was the gift of Emile von Werthen, a show of approval for his son's purchase of a country home. Werthen's father had sent for special rye-grass seed from the All England Lawn Tennis Club and had also dispatched the invaluable Stein to create the court, or at least see to its planting.

Of course, Werthen's father had never asked if such a gift might be appreciated, or indeed if it were even appropriate. Stein had merely showed up at Werthen's door earlier in the week, his wagon full of hoes, shovels, pick axes, measuring sticks and twine, and the large roller. He'd even brought along a tent to camp out, but

Werthen would not hear of that, establishing him in the spare bedroom in the farmhouse instead.

It was as much an embarrassment for Stein as for Werthen that his arrival was unannounced.

Werthen, not one for organized sport, intended to let the grass grow knee deep on the prospective court, to become a wild part of nature again once Stein departed.

A hawk overhead caught Werthen's attention, and then looking down the lane leading to the farmhouse he saw a man approaching. He was a slight figure, dressed all in white on this warm late-spring day. He wore a straw boater and carried a walking stick, using it like a baton as he strolled down the lane – as if keeping time to music. As the man drew nearer, Werthen could hear that he was, indeed, whistling as he walked, at one moment a tuneless mimicry of birdsong, then abruptly transformed to a snippet from Wagner and then one from Mozart.

Another figure now came into view, his daughter, young Frieda, toddling towards the stranger on sturdy legs, with Berthe close behind her. The child was dressed in a white pinafore, but went hatless in the strong sunshine. Her auburn curls were below her ears now.

It was as if his daughter knew this stranger, for she picked up speed on tumbling legs, staggering downhill. She was pulling away from Berthe, who seemed to be amused by this display of independence. As Frieda neared the man in white, Werthen felt a sudden and inexplicable panic. What did he know of this man? What if he were to sweep up Frieda in one arm and abscond with her?

He dropped the secateurs he was carrying and began running round the side of the farmhouse, built in a square around a central courtyard. He wanted to call out to Berthe, to warn her, but he could not find voice. The man in the linen suit was leaning down to one knee, actually beckoning to Frieda, who began giggling insanely as she tottered towards him.

In desperation Werthen leaped over a watering can, catapulted himself over the fence, and found himself face to face with Berthe, who was startled at his arrival.

'What are you on about?' she said as he stood panting in front of her, gesticulating towards Frieda.

'Did you forget?' she said. 'Salten. He's come to see you about a case.'

God! He had forgotten.

He looked at his daughter and now realized that she was not attracted to the man in white, the journalist Felix Salten, at all. Nor was Salten beckoning to Frieda. Both of them were trying to gain the attention of a long-haired dachshund that was happily chasing butterflies and cavorting among the red poppies, pale-blue liverwort and yellow saffron in the fields.

Salten took three cubes of sugar in his tea, watching with a keen parental eye the antics of Mimi, his beloved dachshund, playing on the flagstones of the kitchen floor with Frieda.

‘I do appreciate you letting me meet you like this,’ the journalist said.

‘Not at all,’ Werthen said, though somewhat abstractedly. It was his habit to try to determine the nature of the commission that prospective clients were bringing him, and that was the mental exercise he set himself now.

Theater critic of the *Wiener Allgemeinen Zeitung*, Salten could have earned himself a number of enemies for the biting satire of his reviews. In fact, several years back he had got into a famous altercation with Karl Kraus at the Café Central that led to Salten giving the other journalist a cuff on the ear. A threatening letter, then?

Or was it a missing person? A lover, perhaps? Werthen, via Berthe, who kept up with such matters, knew Salten had a rather complicated love life. On the other hand, Salten might have come on behalf of his current mistress, the Burgtheater actress Otilie Metzel.

‘Is it appropriate that I speak of business here?’ His eyes trailed to the frolicking pair on the floor.

‘Shall we finish our tea? Then we can retire to my office.’

Berthe cast her husband a reproachful glance.

‘Actually,’ Werthen quickly added, ‘there’s no reason we could not discuss matters here. My wife is part of the agency, you know.’

Salten, small and courtly-looking, sporting a rather jaunty, self-satisfied moustache, nodded at Berthe, who was rearranging glasses in the cupboards. They were still settling in for the summer months when the family would spend more time in the country.

‘I didn’t know. Quite an unconventional family.’

Werthen was unsure how to take this comment. Was it a compliment or an insult? A man like Salten – part of the Jung Wien group of writers and an up-and-coming literary man who had, the year before, published his first collection of stories – might very well

expect Werthen to be a staid old bureaucrat; a wills and trusts lawyer despite his sideline in private inquiries.

'I of course mean no slight with that description,' Salten hastily added, as if sensing Werthen's discomfort.

'None taken,' Werthen said, but he traded glances with his wife once again.

'For me, unconventional is a word of respect. A high compliment, in fact.'

Werthen smiled at the comment.

'I know your work,' Salten said.

'I have had some small successes, to be sure,' Werthen said. 'The Mahler case among others.'

'No, no,' the other interjected. 'I mean your literary work. I edited one of your pieces for *An der schönen blauen Donau*. I rather liked your boulevardier . . . What was his name?'

'Maxim.'

'Right,' said Salten. 'Rather a nice tip of the hat to our friend Schnitzler, I thought at the time.'

'How so?' Werthen asked, feeling suddenly protective of this short story he had written a number of years ago.

'There is a certain resonance to the name,' Salten said, obviously enjoying a discussion of the subject closest to his heart. 'First there is the association with the establishment of that name in Paris. Maxim's restaurant and cabaret caters to the rich and powerful of the world.'

'I hadn't really thought of that,' Werthen said, thinking better now of his character, who was something of a silly skirt-chasing fop.

'But how does Schnitzler come into it?' Berthe inquired.

'Well, there's Schnitzler's beloved Anatol, of course, the subject of his early plays. The constant playboy, forever in love and forever changing partners. You might recall that his best friend and sometimes advisor was named Max.'

Salten leaned back in his chair with a sigh. It was a physical gesture Werthen knew only too well from his years in the courtroom. The prosecution rests, your honor.

'Those are indeed interesting associations, Herr Salten. And I am flattered that you, a well-known writer yourself, should remember the scribblings of an amateur.'

Salten made no immediate reply. He stirred his tea, blowing over the rim of the cup though the contents were long since cooled.

‘I am hardly the well-known figure you describe, Advokat Werthen. In my mind’s eye I am still poor little unhealthy Siegmund Salzmann from Budapest toiling away in my cousin’s insurance office. Those days are not so very far behind me.’

He looked wistfully at his dog and Werthen’s daughter. ‘It must be wonderful having a child.’

About to respond in the positive, Werthen was silenced by Salten’s next remark.

‘But enough of socializing. To the matter at hand. I come about murder, sir.’

The word resounded in the cosy kitchen like a blasphemy.

‘Whose murder, Herr Salten? A friend?’

‘I represent another in this inquiry.’

‘But surely the police—’

‘The victim is of too low a status to warrant their concern.’

‘And your client?’

‘Frau Josephine Mutzenbacher. I am currently engaged in writing her life story.’

‘A literary figure?’ Werthen asked, not recognizing the name.

Which comment brought a low chortle from Salten. ‘Hardly! In point of fact, the woman runs a brothel. Rather high-class, mind you, but a brothel all the same.’

‘A madam?’ Berthe said, now joining them at the table.

Salten pursed his lips in assent. ‘Frau Mutzenbacher is a rather amazing woman. Born in Ottakring, of course. Her father was a saddler. She herself was initiated into the world of Eros at a most tender age.’

He quickly cast his eyes Berthe’s way, not wanting to cause embarrassment. Seeing none, he proceeded.

‘They called her Pepi. She entered the brothels at the age of twelve, as a licensed prostitute. But by cunning, and sometimes sheer disarming honesty, she worked her way up in her chosen profession. Now, at the age of fifty, she operates one of the finest houses in the Empire. And what is most incredible about the woman is that she has not an ounce of bitterness about her hard life. On the contrary, she is quite humorous in the detailing of her various liaisons.’

‘And the victim is therefore one of the good lady’s working ménage, one assumes,’ said Werthen. ‘The person deemed of too low status by the police?’

‘Exactly.’

'Does this have anything to do with that unfortunate girl found in the Prater on May Day?' Berthe asked.

The death had made the headlines in an otherwise dull news climate, but had been just as quickly forgotten when supplanted by a much bigger news story: the death of Count Joachim von Ebersdorf several days later, victim of bad shellfish. An absurd way to die, Werthen thought. Eating oysters in land-locked Vienna.

'Very good, Frau Werthen.'

Werthen waited for his wife to correct Salten. Instead, she smiled wanly at his compliment.

'Meisner, actually,' she said after a pause. 'Frau Meisner. I kept my maiden name.'

This made Salten sit up in his chair. 'My apologies, Frau Meisner.'

Werthen was tiring of all this toing and froing. 'The murdered girl, Herr Salten. What is Frau Mutzenbacher's interest in her, other than commercial?'

'You'll have to ask her that, Advokat. That is, if you accept the commission.'

'Frieda, dear,' Berthe said to their daughter. 'Don't pull the doggie's ears. She doesn't like that.'

'Sof ears,' the child said.

'They are that,' Salten said. 'Like silk.'

Frieda, squatting by the rather impatient animal, craned her neck Salten's way.

'Sill,' she said.

'Silk.'

'And how is it you have come to me?' asked Werthen, redirecting the conversation once again.

'Well, it was over a game of Tarock, actually. I enjoy a hand or two at the Café Landtmann now and again, and two days ago my usual partners and I were joined by Gustav Klimt.'

'I would never credit Klimt with the patience for cards,' Berthe said, but her eyes were still on Frieda and the dachshund.

'True,' said Salten. 'It is my considered judgment that he would be better off with a more physical pastime.'

'Such as lifting dumbbells,' Werthen said. 'I mean it quite literally. He is very much the one for exercise.'

'And for cream pastries,' Berthe added. 'Please, Frieda. Not the doggie's ears.'

Salten eyed his beloved Mimi warily. 'Perhaps I should tie her up outside.'

He got up and did so. Meanwhile, Berthe took Frieda to another room.

Once Salten returned, the dog began whining outside.

‘Quite a social animal, the dachshund. They don’t like being left alone.’

‘I’m sure she’ll survive,’ Werthen said. ‘So it was Klimt that put you on to me?’

‘I mentioned quite casually the intentions of Frau Mutzenbacher, and he immediately came up with your name.’

‘Most kind of him.’

‘He also mentioned you are quite zealous in your billing. I don’t believe there will be a problem with Frau Mutzenbacher.’

‘Did you know the girl in question?’

‘Mitzi? I’d seen her about. As I say, I am engaged by Frau Mutzenbacher on her memoirs.’

‘I mean in a professional way.’

‘You are a direct one, aren’t you?’

‘I like to know where I am in a case.’

‘No. Not that I haven’t been known for dalliances. I am, of course, now engaged to Fräulein Metzel of the Burgtheater.’

Werthen nodded at this information, but remained silent.

‘She was not my type,’ Salten added.

‘How is that?’

‘I do not know how familiar you are with such establishments as Frau Mutzenbacher’s, Advokat.’

‘Educate me.’

‘Well, there are usually young women to satisfy almost every taste. Including the hard-pressed woman of good birth who takes up the trade to pay off her father’s debts.’

‘A fabrication?’

‘Generally so. At Frau Mutzenbacher’s, always. Her premises are the home of illusion. The high-class lady fallen low appeals to the sensitive trade – the talkers rather than doers, if you understand?’

Werthen nodded. He’d had some experience of the trade during his years of criminal law in Graz, but thought it better to let Salten play the *magister ludi* in this regard. No telling what a fellow might blurt out when in an educative mood.

‘Then of course there is the pale young thing who never says a word, the mute of the boudoir. And the tough woman with the heart of gold, the soft woman with the harsh voice and tendency toward discipline. I’m sure you understand.’

‘And what was Mitzi’s role?’

‘The child virgin. Don’t get me wrong,’ said Salten quickly, seeing Werthen’s look of disapproval. ‘She was neither. But she was quite young-looking, a diminutive young woman who could and did easily pass for thirteen. In point of fact, she was nineteen.’

‘So her clients believed she was a child?’

‘I would assume so, though I’m hardly privy to their thoughts. Really, you must put these questions to Frau Mutzenbacher. I only saw the girl in passing a few times. Bringing tea to us as we worked during the day. That sort of thing. She seemed to be a special favorite of Frau Mutzenbacher.’

The whines grew more insistent from outside.

In the end, Werthen, deciding prostitutes also deserve justice, agreed to the commission and set up a time for an interview with Frau Mutzenbacher the following Monday. The case was already over two weeks old, so there seemed no need for undue haste, and Werthen and his family had planned a weekend in the country.

Salten said his goodbyes to Berthe and Frieda and went off down the lane, with Mimi trotting along quite proudly in front.

That evening Berthe experimented with a new spaghetti recipe. They waited for these breaks from Vienna and their housekeeper, Frau Blatschky, and her traditional Austrian cooking, to try more exotic fare. Werthen had noticed that of late his wife had taken more of an interest in cooking. He doubted very much that it was merely a sign of increased domesticity. Instead, he supposed that she was finding variation, and a sense of discovery in whatever way she could, for as a new mother she had been tied more closely to home since Frieda’s birth.

Stein, freshly scrubbed after his day’s exertion building the tennis court, looked at his plate of pasta with a degree of suspicion. Then, watching Berthe twirl a bit round the tines of her fork, followed suit and was soon slurping along with the rest.

They had moved on to the meat course, veal, which for Stein was more recognizable, when he said, ‘The rye grass is experimental at best.’

‘Pardon?’ Werthen said.

He was watching Frieda, who was lingering over her pasta, busily painting her cheeks a brilliant orange with the sauce.

‘We’re not really too sure about how well it will do in this loamy soil. Your father and myself, that is.’

‘I did not expect you were referring to your own father,’ Werthen said with a smile. Stein senior had long since been pensioned off, though still living on the von Werthen estate. ‘Young’ Stein, as he was called although he was a bit older than Werthen, had taken his place a number of years ago.

‘He still misses the work,’ Stein said ruefully.

‘Why the experiment?’ Werthen said at length.

‘Well, to see what grass will be best for your father’s new place.’

‘New place?’

Stein laid down his fork. ‘You didn’t know he is purchasing land near here?’

Werthen felt his entire face sag in dismay, then hurriedly got control of his emotions.

‘I expect he was planning it as a surprise.’

‘Yes,’ Berthe chimed in. ‘Very much a surprise.’

‘I must apologize,’ Stein said, his face reddening at his perceived *faux pas*.

‘Not at all, Stein,’ Werthen reassured him. ‘One assumes he is not creating a tennis academy to rival the All England Croquet and Lawn Tennis Club?’

A polite demi-laugh issued from Stein. ‘It’s to round out the new estate. I believe there’s to be an equestrian ground, as well. It is the sole topic of conversation at Hohelände.’

‘It’s only natural they want to be near their only grandchild,’ Berthe said.

They were lying side by side in bed, gazing up at the darkened ceiling.

‘Perverse, not natural. Stein says the property is near here. Just a bit of breathing room, that is all I require.’

‘They probably assume that now we have a summer home they would not see much of us at Hohelände.’

‘And they would be right. I do not have the fondest memories of that house.’

‘Even though that’s where we met?’

The bed boards underneath the cotton mattress creaked as Werthen rolled on to his side to face his wife.

‘You are being awfully conciliatory about this. It affects us both, you know. They’ll be constantly underfoot, or expect us to be their guests. This is my little piece of heaven and I do not appreciate interlopers.’

'It's the Burgtheater for you, Karl. So dramatic.'

'Have you forgotten how difficult my father and mother are to be around? And I repeat, why are you suddenly the peacemaker?'

She said nothing for a moment. A fly had got into the house and was now busily buzzing in the dusk of the room.

'It is only natural for grandparents to want to be near their grandchild.'

She continued staring at the black expanse overhead.

'Is there something you've been wanting to tell me?' he asked.

'Father mentioned that he might be moving to Vienna. Well, not *moving*. Perhaps a *pied-à-terre* to begin with.'

'Wonderful!' Werthen groaned. 'They've got us boxed in on both fronts.'

'It doesn't have to be like that,' Berthe said.

'Don't you remember the argument over christening?'

'That was settled amicably enough,' Berthe said.

'Yes. But I had to threaten to bring Frieda up a Buddhist unless they stopped intervening. The hypocrisy of it. We're all Jews – it doesn't matter whether they are assimilated or not, or if they were baptized Christians or not. Yet they go about playing at being German aristocrats.'

'It's their lives, their hypocrisy.'

'Not when it has an impact on our lives. And let us not forget your father's insistence on an *aliyah* naming ceremony for Frieda.'

'But he finds her name so Nordic.'

'Better Ruth? That is fine, though. I understand his position. After all, he is a leading Talmudic scholar . . .'

'It's not about religion. It's more about tradition for him.'

'Fine. So now he will be in Vienna part of the time to be close to Ruth.'

'There is a silver lining,' Berthe said, turning to him now and placing a kiss on his nose. 'There is a certain widow he has met . . .'

'Nuptials in the offing? Sorry. I don't know why I am being so difficult about all of this. I enjoy your father. I even enjoy seeing my parents with Frieda now and again. It just feels suddenly like the world is crowding in on us.'

She moved against him, putting a soothing hand around the hair at the base of his head. Her fingers felt cool to the touch. Her lips touched his.

'Not the world,' she said, moving closer. 'Just me.'

In the middle of the night Frieda woke them with a cry. Berthe

went to her and then came back to their bed with the little bundle of their daughter cradled in her arms.

‘It’s still a strange room to her. She’ll get used to it.’

‘I don’t mind,’ he said. ‘A couple of hours ago, maybe. But now —’

‘There,’ Berthe cooed to the infant as she lodged Frieda between them. She was asleep again in a matter of minutes.

‘I’ve been wondering,’ Werthen began.

‘No more discussion about our parents tonight. Please.’

‘No. About Salten. Was he hiding something, do you think?’

‘You mean when you asked him about his personal contact with the unfortunate young woman?’

‘So you overheard our conversation?’

She ignored this question. ‘Definitely defensive.’

‘Why, one wonders?’