

for H. P. Schoenheimer

THIS HAND OF MINE:

A severed human hand haunted the house. One day the scullery maid, drying her hands, found an active third hand between her own in the roller towel. She gave notice, as I recall. That was a scene which I've always remembered from a well known horror story read in my youth: The Beast with Five Fingers. I've remembered it because it hints at something which all of us must suspect at times: that the hand is to some extent a separate animal from the human. It is autonomous and self-willed. How else can one explain why some people are natural players of any musical instrument they pick up, and others are spectacular fieldsmen or bowlers, and others precise surgeons, and others can use a paintbrush to depict infinite subtlety of expression. You might say that all are the result of intensely delicate control of a brain over a hand. Yet all those expert people can do well only their own thing, and usually none of the other things. You might say that they were drawn to music or cricket or surgery or art, that they love it and live it, and have trained their hand to perform it expertly. But that simply is not ^{so} true. Certain brains are naturally drawn to certain activities, it is true, but if the hands connected to those brains are not equally enthusiastic, and if they refuse to cooperate, the brain can do nothing but direct its carrier to some other career. On the other hand (if you follow me) the beast with five fingers is often especially drawn to some activity which comes easily to it. It takes some firm direction early in life. Then the brain has no choice but to follow it. Thus we find around us so many people who are highly proficient craftsmen at their job, whatever

it is, but are painfully dull and unoriginal at it: all skill and no thought. And we find musicians who can compose fine music but cannot play it, or artists who can read fine nuances of meaning in another person's facial expressions but cannot quite catch them on canvas. My own hand has been unkind to my brain in an obstructionist sort of way all my life. At times its attitude has been quite insufferable, as when it refuses to catch balls thrown at it — which is the least any decent Australian hand should do — no matter how firmly prodded by my brain. Its ability with a pencil in drawing inanimate objects and its disinclination to draw animate ones helped to lead me originally to architecture. Some people, no doubt, have a less recalcitrant hand. Yet remember this: when a handwriting expert claims to read a person's character he is actually reading a hand's character. And that's rarely the same thing.