

Medical College Sketched

The Ex-Professor's Stories—The Skull

by Dr. Paeon

Many visitors to the College Museum have paused before the skull numbered 1750, and read with an indefinable feeling, resembling terror, the word written appropriately in red ink thereon, namely, "*Murderer.*"

Some persons have mistaken 1750 for an Ape's skull. This is a mistake; it was the skull of a human being, contained a certain amount of human brain, was the dome of what thought and the palace of what soul its original owner possessed.

This is the terrible story always brought to my mind by the sight of No. 1750.

I passed, during the early portion of my life, several years in Italy, at a villiage near which are the buried ruins of Pompeii. I had secured employment that would allow me full access to the interesting *debris* of that ancient city. Having graduated with honors from a medical school in America and studied diligently in the hospitals of Paris, it was a most agreeable relaxation to my strained energies, to watch day after day the unearthing of these people, their houses, their utensils, and "admire" how perfectly everything was changed into portions of a great sculpture piece by the white plaster of the Savans, and became acquainted with the peculiarities of a people who had gone "unshriven and unannealed" into their graves—what time the torrent of the volcano swept down the sides of old Vesuvius not quite eighty years after the crucifixion of our Lord.

I boarded at a very respectable Inn, presided over by a pale-faced host and his pale-faced wife.

Marco Carroll was no host about the belly, for it was thin and pinched; was no host about the cheeks, for they were sunken and hollow; was no host in merriment, for he never laughed, neither did he crack jokes; was no host in his profanity, for he never swore.

Where a nod or twist of the head would do, he would nod and twist; but he rarely spoke, though he listened attentively. I know not in what particular he was a host, except in the fact that he owned the Inn.

His black hair fell like a pall, in thick masses, to his shoulders and back. His black eyes shone like the eyes that gleam from the region of despair. In short, there was such a sombre atmosphere about him that I would as soon meet a ghost in a churchyard as him.

His wife partook of the disposition and appearance of her husband. He was a curtain between her and the sun's rays, and both moved together like twins in despondency and shadow.

But his innumerable guests forget him and his wife in admiration of their excellent fare and general efficiency.

One night Marco came to me and began to use, to my great surprise, what I really doubted his possessing in good working order—his tongue.

“Signor,” he asked, “were you disturbed last night?”

I remember that I had been, and I said so.

“I will remove your couch, Signor, so that you will not be troubled in like manner again. You must make allowance for me, and you will when you hear that the noise was occasioned by the sudden illness of my unfortunate boy, Christoval!”

“Christoval?” I asked, not knowing to whom he referred. “Have you a son of that name?”

“Would to God and the Virgin I had not,” cried Marco. “My idiot boy is the helpless instrument of God’s vengeance upon the sins of my youth. Poor Christoval! God’s will be done!”

So saying, the strange host turned from me without any further word of explanation.

The noble Count Diego of M—, with his retinue and servants, on a visit to the ruins, and direct from Rome, at about midnight on the 25th of July, 1825, honored the Inn of the silent Marco with his magnificent presence. The noble count was somewhat intoxicated, but notwithstanding was able to kick his private secretary and immediate dependents out of his bedroom. I say notwithstanding, because it was not with standing, but with lying on his back and kicking out his heels that he compelled those persons (so excessively fond of him) to retreat.

When he finally did find his virtuous couch and stumble into it with a chair in his hand, which had refused to support him, his drunken snoring was so intolerable to his only three quarters drunken private secretary, who lay on a lounge stretched outside his master’s door, that that functionary failed to get to sleep until long past four in the morning; and he had rested but fifteen minutes then, before he awoke in a fright at something, he knew not what. He was inclined to think, on reflection, that a bat, which hung from the wall, had been the cause of his awakening. So, after having chased that ominous creature about the room for a length of time, without being able either to capture or drive it out, he took a moderate sip at a bottle of wine which he found in his cloak pocket, and swore by the several Saints with whom he was acquainted, that he would repose at his ease from that time until the sun rose.

There was great bustle in the Inn that morning. There was a notable breakfast preparing in the kingdom of the cook. The tables in the dining room were adorned with flowers, and graced with all the luxuries that the country round could bestow upon its guest. The Count’s servitors snuffed the delicious incense which is compounded of the grateful aroma of coffee carried on the fresh breeze of the early day,—and cursed the minutes that old time seemed so niggard of.

At last the sun rose and with it rose the private Secretary. As he stood upright to stretch himself and rub his reddened eyes, the bottle of wine which he had made use of over night, fell to his feet.

“Allow me, Signor!” said the pale Marco who had been watching him in his sleep, and on seeing the fall of the bottle he immediately stooped to pick it up.

As he received it with thanks, a shock passed over the debilitated frame work of the private Secretary. He remembered that his mater’s boots must be stained and muddied with yesterday’s traveling, and that at any moment his most potent Countship might tumble out of bed and find them so! By the five corns on the big toe of his holiness! This must not be.

The private Secretary accordingly crept into his master’s room to look after his master’s leathers. Holy Virgin it would take no time to black them!

There were a dozen gay gentlemen waiting in the hall of the Inn when the private Secretary as pale as his ruffles rushed out among them. His hands were thrown aloft and he seemed wild with horror.

He only found words when he observed the black eyes of Marco fixed upon him.

“Seize on that man!” he cried, “Seize on the landlord.”

Affrighted and astonished it was done as ordered, by those nearest the host.

As mute as a mummy in black swaddling clothes of buried centuries, stood Marco, in the somber garments of the living century which it pleased him to don.

Swords were drawn. Questions were asked to which only those who crowded the Count’s chamber could answer. Presently to the uproar succeeded a great silence. A passage was made between the people, that extended from the chamber into the hall. Through this four men advanced carrying a dead body. It was the Count’s. Upon its forehead was impressed a something that was not the signet of Nobility. An indentation in the broad frontal bone that might have been made with a common tack hammer.

The friends of the Count Diego had prophesied that after the manner of his noble ancestors he would go staggering out of this world, in company with an equally jolly and eccentric friend—the right social tremens. But he had ignominiously, as we have seen, allowed himself to be murdered by an instrument that pounded a little hole in his skull—exactly as little holes are pounded in bullocks.

Who was his murderer?

A dozen persons were arrested and tried before the authorities; no one was proved guilty. When Marco first cast eyes on the body he fainted. When afterwards he was accused of complicity he, characteristically, made no reply; but was heard to say when he thought himself alone, *“It is God’s vengeance!”*

Himself, his wife, and the idiot boy Christoval were together arrested, confined, and tried—but together they returned to the Inn unconvicted. The last was very strongly suspected at first, but it was proved that he was that night securely chained to the wall of his room,—and that he was but a harmless idiot, who did nothing from day to day but braid his hair and turn and twist his little head and roll about his great wild eyes.

A year passed away. No traveler acquainted with the story tarried at the Inn. Marcos home custom dropped away. He himself grew more melancholy. His Inn began to take on a dilapidated air. One by one the curtains of the windows were let down and not raised again. And, finally, the ignorant traveler traveling before its threshold, would have pursued his course, thinking naturally, that the old Inn had retired from business and lived on the interest of its money.

But towards the end of the year an Englishman, by the name of Brown, traveling quietly with his *valet*, stopped at the Inn over night and was found dead in the morning. The same indentation was in *his* brow that was in the Count's. The same instrument had slain him and by the same hand wielded—without a doubt.

Marco, his wife, and the idiot, were again arrested, *and again discharged*.

The law was satisfied of their innocence; that is there was no direct proof against them. It would be tedious here to explain why. The people, however, were not at all satisfied of this; and it came to my ears that that great animal with many teeth—a mob were determined to take the case of Marco into its hands. To burn down indeed his unfortunate Inn, from whose windows the Count's ghost, in the shape of a fiend, was always looking; and up and down whose halls and stairs the disembodied English soul walked in respectable top boots.

The night before the intended attack, a French detective, in the guise of a Spaniard, arrived about twilight at the Inn. Marco refused to allow him to stop. He protested that the people would tear him to pieces if they knew he had admitted another traveler *over night*. The detective, imitating the maudlin tones of a drunken man, swore that he would stay over night. He had money and would pay. But Marco avowed, in his brief manner, that the people would murder him. To which the drunken fellow naively replied, “that nobody knew of his being there.” At which assertion (of course a falsehood) the landlord relented, and after a while showed the policeman to bed *in the very room* in which the two tragedies had been enacted. After the landlord, having narrowly scanned the room, left it, a man stepped from a little closet and greeted the guest.

This man was myself, who, knowing the ins of the house, had crept into it without being seen, and according to appointment, had awaited the detective's coming. He greeted me with a whisper, and together we examined the chamber.

There was a window at its northern end, which looked down upon the Inn's stoop. This was securely fastened. A bureau, several chairs, and a stand with washing materials beside the iron bed, was all that the room contained, as most of its furniture had been, for some reason, removed from it.

With its head board against the wall stood the couch in which both the unfortunate travelers had slept their last sleep. The wall above the beds' head was covered with a peculiar pattern of figured paper, which in several places had become detached, showing the board, which in lieu of lath and plaster, formed the exceedingly thick wall to the room.

The Parisian detective was busy over his carpet-bag when I upon my hands and knees commenced to examine the floor of the room, being possessed of the idea that it was not entirely innocent of such a thing as a trap-door. However, I discovered none, although the carpet which had covered it during the Count's visit was absent, and I had every opportunity to discover one, if present.

I arose from the floor by the window and took occasion to look out. There, upon the stoop, leaning like a statue against one of the white pillars, I saw Marco. His large hat was drawn over his eyes, his head was bent, and his hands were crossed upon his breast. He seemed the impersonation of sadness, and even where I stood I could hear him utter disjointed sentences and sigh. His action and his words alike indicated a soul devoured by silent misery.

I turned from gazing on him; I was in no small degree surprised to see my ally standing in the rooms' centre, and also to discover a man's hand buried in the pillows of the couch.

I asked of course concerning the new comer; but the detective put his finger to his lips and whispered to me to be silent. I had no doubt, however, but that he was a fellow officer.

He drew me to the closet in which I had been concealed. During my search for the trap, he had made a number of gimlet-holes in the door, through which we could watch the apparently sleeping man on the bed.

In this closet we waited many hours.

I should think it was half past twelve, when after having examined with almost ridiculous minuteness every thing in the room (of course with my eyes, through the gimlet hole) I finally fastened upon a spot above the bed's head, on the wall, where the paper had been torn away.

There was a large knot in the wooden wall where it had been thus denuded, and to my fancy there was something peculiar about that knot, I could at first not say what it was. The more I looked at it, and the steadier, the more convinced I was, that either my eyes deceived me (and they were eyes that defied glass-ware) or there was something peculiar about that knot. I drew my companion's attention towards it. He looked at it steadily. He too became convinced. The knot was slowly sinking into the wall; or was being drawn out!

It retreated—back—back—back! It finally disappeared from sight and left a great black hole behind it. This hole must have been nearly a half-a-foot in diameter.

Then through the hole stealthily appeared an arm. A long boney arm grasping a mallet! The hand was raised and the mallet descended!

I leaped from the closet, crying “Murder!”

I was too late. The mallet descended upon the head of the sleeper. A dull heavy crash—“Oh!”

“Don’t be alarmed my good fellow—the head is wood!—Don’t you see this is no living person but merely the head of a decoy image!—Come! Assist me to discover the would be murderer!”

At this instant a face appeared at the knot hole. A laughing face. The face of a fiend. A foolish face. The face of Christoval the idiot!

Yes—the two murders were the work of an idiot. He who being trusted abroad would have been incapable of self-preservation,—who was unable to feed himself—and who passed his days braiding his hair and wagging his head; chained to a wall. So we found him in the next room; the great heavy chain bound around him and fastened to a staple. Yet this being so contemptible, had during his solitary confinement, managed to discover how easily the knot in the wall was removed—had obtained an instrument of destruction—and had brought about such fearful results.

How mysteriously vouchsafed are those moments in the lives of the imbecile, when constructive reasoning becomes possible for them—and how fearfully, and for what purposes of astute deviltry are these moments often used.

Marco had committed a grave crime in his youth for which he had long ago repented—but which so troubled a tender conscience as to make him the man he was. A mob (the cruelest offspring of society) coming to sacrifice the father—murdered the son. No. 1750 is his skull.

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