

A Nail in the Skull

by P. Henry Doyle

In the Morgue, at Paris, had been brought the body of a young man found floating in the Seine.

Drowning had not caused his death, for driven into the skull, and almost hidden by the long, black curly hair, was an iron spike about four inches long.

This, the physicians said, had been the instrument of his murder. He had probably been choked into senselessness by a powerful hand, and the deed committed. He had then been cast into the water.

Although the most perfect in the world, the police of the great city were unable to unravel the crime. A stranger cannot remain within its limits twenty-four hours even, without being known to the agents of the law, but of this youth they knew nothing. Who he was, whence he came, his object in the metropolis, were equally mysterious and unfathomable.

The hotels and lodging-houses, which are required to keep a registry of all inmates, were examined by the detectives, but to no purpose. None knew him—none had seen him.

The garments found upon his person, and which hung upon a peg, still dripping on the half-naked man beneath, had offered no clue. They were those of a person moving in the better class of society, not in any way unlike the tens of thousands met daily on the public streets.

With a look of chagrin, a well-known detective, engaged in the search, stood gazing thoughtfully through one of the little glass windows that opened on the space inclosing the dead. It was the last of the three days that the body should be exposed, and he had given up all hopes of finding the guilty party.

A slight noise of voices at the door caused him to turn his head.

Familiar with the faces of the new comers, he recognized them as actors at one of the city theatres.

At the time—and even to this day—the Morgue was a schoolroom for these children of the stage. They came to watch and study, unknown, the varying expression of horror, disgust and terror depicted on the faces of visitors as their eyes first caught sight of the slimy corpses on the stone slabs beneath.

The present party was composed of two ladies and three gentlemen. One of the men refused to enter, and the efforts of the others to induce him was what had disturbed the reverie of the officer.

“No, I’ve seen him. I don’t care to go in. I’ll wait for you here.”

The words were distinctly heard by the detective, who knew the speaker as one of the most talented, but erratic, tragedians then in vogue.

He had himself not yet been observed by the incomers, to whom he was as well known as they to him, and hastily stepping back, he entered a small room to which the general public was not admitted.

The actors remained but a little while, for despite the singular method of murder, and the publicity given to the case, visitors were not numerous.

Indeed it had been often noticed that deaths of popular horror— where the body was almost putrid— or the face or person crushed in some disgusting manner, the crowds of eager sightseers were always greater.

The case, and it had been the sole occupant of the dread abode since its arrival, was without these attractions. Indeed, were it not for the irregularly square nail-hole in the skull, strongly contrasting with the white skin, there was nothing to tell but that he had died by the silent visitation of God!

So the players left and joined their friend outside. The others were lively and talkative, naturally perhaps, but his seemed a forced gayety.

The party stopped at various cafes and gardens on their return homeward drinking wine and brandy.

But at every halt some stranger or other would enter and occupy a seat near them. The first in a different dress, but with a bearing much like that of the detective, had followed them from the Morgue.

He had spoken a few words to a *commissionaire* he had met upon a corner, who dogged their footsteps until some distance on he came in contact with a man walking along in the dress of a soldier, who, in his turn, tracked and watched them.

The agents of the French Police are to be found everywhere, and in all sorts of ostensible occupations, in every quarter of Paris.

The legal period expired, and no claimant arising, the body of the man “murdered by a spike through the brain,” as the verdict had it, was ordered to be buried in the “common ditch”— the Potter’s Field of the outcast and unknown.

The strange affair apparently died entirely out of the public mind. The Morgue repeated, in other forms, its ghastly story: visitors came, and were shocked, actors and actresses continued to go there in the interest of Art, and everywhere the great drama of life was still played on, as is its wont.

A certain detective, however, never entered the dead-house, nor did a certain leading actor.

It was singular, moreover, that so many people called to make trivial inquiries at the theatre. The manager was surprised at it, but hoping it was nothing more than increasing popularity, gave no other expression of wonder.

One day a police official entered his office.

“Tonight, sir, I believe,” he said, “you play ‘Hamlet?’”

The manager bowed in the affirmative.

“And Monsieur M—, your leading man, plays the Prince?”

The manager bowed again.

“In the name of Justice, then,” continued the visitor, “I demand the privilege of furnishing a part of the Prince’s ‘properties.’ I assure you, sir, the representation shall receive no detriment by any fault or omission of mine.”

He at once stated his desire, and though the manager seemed terribly struck by some of his disclosures, he willingly consented to his demands.

“Hamlet” was “on,” and M— as the melancholy Dane, never acted better. The claquers were out in force, but their interested applause was not necessary. The audience was enthusiastic.

The grave-diggers were in the grave, and the habitués of the place noticed that the “second” of these functionaries, as they are called in the programme, was an entire stranger to the stage. Any attention it might have excited, however, was lost in the entrance of Hamlet and Horatio.

Suddenly, with an awkward stage-action, the second grave-digger threw out a skull, and leaned on his pick as he observed Hamlet in the “business” of the scene, stoop and pick it up.

The Prince had begun his speech:

“Alas! poor Yorik!”

when his hand, moving over the yellow, bony surface, touched something hard and cold.

The eye of the grave-digger fairly glittered as he saw him start, tremble, and drop the skull, which fell with a dull, heavy metallic thud on the green carpet.

A long iron spike ran through it from forehead to base.

While the auditors were wondering at the strange act, and the stranger paralysis that seemed to have overcome their favorite, the detective leaped from the grave and shouted:

“I arrest Monsieur M— for murder!”

One wild look at the strong hand on his shoulder, and the actor, shrieking in a wild frenzy, fainted.

In an instant all was terror and confusion, but from the supernumeraries present came forward six persons, who throwing off their theatrical accoutrements, showed themselves policemen.

Amid an uproar the curtain dropped and the audience dispersed.

M—, on reviving, was wandering in his mind, and never recovered. But amid his madness he told an awful tale.

He had killed the stranger who had been found with the nail in his skull. He belonged in Alsace, his own province. In younger days M— had robbed him. Meeting the actor in the city, he had threatened exposure. A return of the stolen money would not satisfy him. He said he would cling to him for life.

They were walking one night and talking it over near the Halle au Vins. On the pavement his foot struck a spike evidently dropped by one of the coopers in the establishment. He picked it up, and from that moment, in mind, he was an assassin. In a lonely spot he had grasped his enemy by the throat, choked him, and then, to assure his work, driven, with a barrel stave, the spike through his brain.

His hesitancy about entering the Morgue on the eventful last day of the body’s exposure, had given the first hint to the officer, who had finally worked out his detection and conviction.

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