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THE STORY OF A NAIL.

By CHARLES V. CUSACHS.

I was on my way to Malaga, and the train was crowded. The only vacant seat in the coach was beside me, and I was in constant fear lest some unpleasant fellow traveler might choose to appropriate it.

"You are on your way to Malaga, I presume?" "Yes, sir." "From Granada?" "No, sir."

My replies were more extensive than hers had been, so that ere breakfast time we were chatting quite familiarly.

"I give you many thanks for your kindness to me on this journey, and I beg you will not think me ungrateful if I do not disclose my name."

"Two o'clock on the evening of November 1st in this same year found me en route to Salto, an important town in the province of Cordova.

"What order and taste you have shown everywhere, Juan, in fitting it up! But then—how foolish of me!—you are married, of course?"

"No," he answered; "not married, nor likely to be."

"That you are not," I answered, "it may be, else why had you not written me of it? But that you will not before long I cannot accept so readily."

"You shall hear my story, my dear fellow. I have indeed passed through an unhappy time since we met, and been extremely miserable.

"To-day is a sort of holiday. All the people of Salto must visit the cemetery, as the custom is, and it will not do for me to remain away.

And so it was agreed. As briefly as I may give it, his story ran as follows:

"Two years ago, while fiscal promoter at Leon, I obtained a few weeks' vacation and went to Seville.

"What is this?" he cried, with something of horror in his voice. "There is a nail driven through the skull!" It was true.

"What crime have we discovered? One that never have been dreamed of by friends, by physicians or by the family of the dead, yet one which under the hand of all-seeing Providence has been thus disclosed to me.

"Judge! Is it possible to find out the name of the person to whom these bones belong?"

"Sexton: 'Well, sir, I saved the plate of the coffin, which was all rotted away. There is something on that, but just what I don't exactly recollect.'"

"The judge had the skull first carefully taken to his house, then we visited the sexton in order to learn the inscription on the plate.

"Sexton: 'Well, sir, I saved the plate of the coffin, which was all rotted away. There is something on that, but just what I don't exactly recollect.'"

"The judge had the skull first carefully taken to his house, then we visited the sexton in order to learn the inscription on the plate. It was very simple, only three initials and the date, as here given: 'A. G. R. 1863.' Juan declared this more than enough for his needs, and was anxious

not? Never by word or sign had she shown that my regard would be distasteful. I had frequently dwelt on the qualities which I sought in the woman I loved.

"Blanche," I said, "to-morrow we must part." The news of my going seemed to startle her.

"Either I go away never to return, or I hasten back to Leon to have my leave extended and come again to make you my wife."

Blanche, it is no sudden fancy that has sprung up in my heart. I love you. I know myself, and thus knowing, I know that never toward any woman shall I feel

"She was moved, but stood for a moment silent. Then, turning two eyes full of passion toward me, she said, softly:

"No, Juan, you are not doing wrong; but I cannot be yours, not even if being the wife of such a man were the highest happiness of my life. It is impossible."

"So be it—good-by."

"I held out my hand, though my heart was full to bursting. She gave a little cry."

"You would leave me thus angry! Oh, I do, do care for you!" Tears came to her eyes.

"Must the short season of pleasure in life that has been mine since you came thus end forever? No, no. I agree to all. Return to Leon, arrange matters, and then come back in one month from now, and I promise to be your wife."

"So it was settled. Believing in the woman I adored, I left for Leon that night.

Arriving there, I made all preparations for my coming, obtained new leave, all in much shorter time than I expected, so that in about a fortnight I was once more on my way to Seville.

I had trusted had deceived me. Within two days after my departure she had gone also, leaving no trace behind. No one could give me the slightest information.

I remained long enough to find there was no clew to be had, and then plunged into business again, vowing never more to be deceived by woman."

We reached the cemetery shortly before my friend had finished his story, and had by this time arrived at a somewhat unfrequented spot, in the effort to keep away from the crowds wandering among the graves.

Frequently as we went along in this retired corner of the graveyard we struck against the whitened bones of some poor peasants dragged from their graves to make room for persons of higher birth.

All at once we came upon the fragments of what had at some time been the frame of a man; nearly all the bones were there, and the fresh appearance of the grave near by showed whence it had but recently been taken.

Thrusting it aside with some repulsion, I was passing on, when an exclamation from Juan arrested me. I turned and saw him bending over the bones as if studying the skull, to which what seemed a shred of black hair still clung.

"What is this?" he cried, with something of horror in his voice. "There is a nail driven through the skull!" It was true. Juan was much agitated.

"What crime have we discovered? One that never have been dreamed of by friends, by physicians or by the family of the dead, yet one which under the hand of all-seeing Providence has been thus disclosed to me.

So long as I may have the power to pursue the thread whose end has been thus strangely given into my hand so long will my zeal be untrifling, and my determination strong and unswerving, to bring the guilty to justice, to atone for a crime which is almost without a parallel."

Calling the sexton, he questioned him, and found that the bones had been disinterred the day previous, to give burial to an old citizen.

"Judge! Is it possible to find out the name of the person to whom these bones belong?"

"Sexton: 'Well, sir, I saved the plate of the coffin, which was all rotted away. There is something on that, but just what I don't exactly recollect.'"

The judge had the skull first carefully taken to his house, then we visited the sexton in order to learn the inscription on the plate. It was very simple, only three initials and the date, as here given: 'A. G. R. 1863.' Juan declared this more than enough for his needs, and was anxious

to hasten at once with the search. The next thing to be accomplished was the examination of the mortuary records of the year given on the plate.

"We have the nail which caused this stroke of apoplexy. It remains for us to discover the hammer."

In the examination which followed these additional facts were ascertained: Don Alfonso had been a few years before a young and wealthy man residing in Madrid.

In 1860 he returned from that place having shortly before married a beautiful lady, Gabriela Zahara. Four months before the death of Don Alfonso his wife left home, and eight days after her return it was that the stroke of apoplexy overtook her husband.

Further particulars were gleaned from the servants who had been in the family at the time, and who were sought with infinite perseverance by my friend.

On the night of their master's death they were startled by the violent ringing of the bell from his room. On hastening thither they found their mistress in the greatest excitement, rushing frantically about, crying that her husband had been attacked with apoplexy and imploring for a doctor in the greatest haste.

The doctor declared that death had been instantaneous, resulting from cerebral congestion. The examination ended, the judge himself summed up the case:

"Whereas, at the time of his death he was alone in the room with his wife; and whereas, this death, from its very nature, could not have been suicide; therefore, we declare that his wife, Gabriela Zahara, is the author of the deed, and for the capture of this woman every possible means shall be employed."

In spite of this, however, three months went by, and no Gabriela Zahara. At this time I left Salto.

III.

The following winter I spent in Granada. One night a ball was given by the Countess of X—, and I was present. It was a brilliant affair, graced by many of the beauties of Granada aristocracy.

Whom should I recognize shortly after my arrival but my chance traveling acquaintance of Malaga! My pleasure was unbounded, and I at once hastened to recall myself to her memory. But it was needless—the recognition was instantaneous.

"I have been faithful to my promise," said I, "and did not seek you; but fortune has been kinder than you, in bringing us together again. I did not dream you would be here; perhaps if I had—you do not know how delicate my conscience is—I might have remained away, to keep you from erring in your dreadful prophecy that we should never meet again. Or perhaps you forbid the renewal of acquaintance!"

She laughed pleasantly, assuring me that I need fear no such command. "May I still further presume to ask the privilege of calling?"

Before she had time to reply some one interrupted us, and we drifted apart.

"Who is she?" I asked a friend, some time later.

His reply was indefinite: "Some strange American girl. Haven't met her, but I believe her name is Alma."

I found out later where she was stopping, and determined to call, although she had given no certain assent to my request of the night before. I did, therefore, the next day, and was received cordially enough, and even invited to remain for dinner.

In some way conversation drifted about until it chanced on the subject of disappointment in love. I told the story of my friend, and Alma seemed much interested. When the story was ended she said:

"Let this serve you as an example. Never allow yourself to love a woman until you know her. As for me, I shall never love anyone," she continued. "I avoid as much as possible meeting the same man twice."

"Do you mean that I must come no more?"

"I mean that to-morrow I leave Granada, so that this will probably be our last meeting."

Saying this, she gave me her hand, and I took my leave.

Business called me to Salto. I found my friend as I had left him. Although I scarce liked to refer to his trouble, I earned enough to know that Blanche had never been heard from. Regarding the case which we had worked up together, I did make inquiries, and found there had been no further developments.

The evening after my arrival I was with Juan in his office, when an officer entered the room with a note. My friend read it and showed it to me.

"A lady wishes to speak with Don Giro at the Inn of the Lion."

"Who brought the note?" the judge asked.

"A servant."

"From whom?"

"He left no name, but went away immediately."

Juan was already wrapping himself in his cloak, and lost no time in setting out. When he returned his whole manner showed the greatest excitement, but it was the excitement of joy.

He threw his arms about me in his happiness. His voice was choked as he cried:

"Ah if you only knew, my friend!—if you could but guess the joy that has come to me!"

"What has happened?" I exclaimed.

"Oh, I am the most fortunate of men! Blanche it was who sent the note; she who met me at the inn—Blanche, my love, my promised wife!"

"But you told me she had deceived you. Has sight of her made you forget all?"

"Blanche does care for me. The truth of it is this: Blanche had to return to her home in Madrid to hasten her own preparations for our marriage, and not expecting me so long before the appointed time, had not thought to leave her address at the hotel.

When I found her gone everything was thrown out of my mind—dates—all save the fact that she had deserted me. So you see for my own foolish haste I have endured years of torment. But now congratulate me."

"I do with my whole heart, my dear fellow. And when is this long-deferred wedding to come off?"

"Very soon; and you will have to act as best man—no one else will do."

"With pleasure."

So we sat on until the small hours of the morning, talking things over.

Early next day another stroke of good fortune, as it appeared, befell my friend. An officer of the peace reported that the efforts of the law had been at last crowned with success.

The long-missing Gabriela Zahara was discovered, and even then in Salto, under lock and key. There was to be no delay in dealing with the case. It had created too much of a sensation to be allowed to rest, now that the supposed murderess was found, and from that instant the judge was most busy, recalling witnesses and getting everything in readiness for the closing scenes of the trial.

Meanwhile I made inquiries about the capture. The result of my investigations I thought best not to communicate to my friend. In listening to the police accounts the names Lion Inn and Madrid fringed my ears.

A sudden, wild suspicion flashed over me. What if Blanche and Gabriela should prove to be the same? Juan was too much absorbed in his work preliminary to the assembling of the court to learn these details, and perhaps my fearful conjecture would prove false. How devoutly I hoped that it might! But the hour drew near which would decide all. Everything was ready.

At one side of the well-lighted courtroom stood a table on which was the box containing the skull that had betrayed the miserable woman. The judge, surrounded by the officers of the law, at length summoned the accused.

"Let Gabriela Zahara, supposed murderess of her husband, now stand forth to answer the charge."

"Great God! I not only in this Gabriela Zahara Blanche—she is my own fellow traveler, the beautiful Alma! My head whirled with conflicting emotions—surprise, horror, incredulity—until I reel, grasping a chair to steady myself. The examination begins.

"What is your name?"

"Gabriela Zahara Romeral," comes back, in a sweet, composed voice.

"Juan hears from her own lips that Blanche, whom he thought to marry, has never lived. It steadies him. In clear penetrating tones he orders the box to be opened. The sexton places it in her hands; her eyes fall upon its contents; and then, with a piercing cry of terror, she gasps out 'Alfonso!' and sinks fainting into a seat.

"Guilty! Everyone in that crowded room knew it. I thought my friend would be overcome, but his next words were almost harsh.

"You recognize the skull of your husband?"

"Yes," she said in a tone full of horror.

"Do you know that this recognition is the acknowledgment of your guilt?—that with your own lips you have branded yourself a murderess?"

"Oh, why should I seek to deny it?" she cried, passionately. "I do not wish

to live any longer, but before I die let me say a few words. I shall not ask for patience long." Juan sat like a man of stone. The courtroom was perfectly still as she went on:

"It was my fate to be the daughter of stern exacting parents, and I was forced to marry a man I detested. Perhaps our life together might have been endurable had not my husband known, even before our marriage, that I did not love him. Now when I was powerless he became insolent, finally brutal. I could bear it no longer, and left home to escape his insults.

While away I met one whom I really loved, and would have married, but was not free to do so. Again I returned home, to the sneers and mockery of my husband. Then he died—died for the man I loved." She looked at Juan. Ah! were the audacious eyes blind they would have read that look of adoration. My friend was about to denounce himself, but she stopped him.

"To free myself I had my husband killed. For this crime God must punish me alone. I wish to die."

Her tears choked her speech. At a sign from the judge the jailer led her away. The details of the sentence I shall not give. Enough to say in this case, as in the foregoing scenes, the judge came from the struggle victorious—the man was crushed.

IV.

It was the day set for the execution, and a throng was awaiting the departure of the doomed woman from the jail. Juan had gone away immediately after her condemnation, asking me to remain on hand in case she desired anything.

She came at last. I could scarcely recognize the woman I had known, so changed had she become in the few day of confinement. As she passed I drew close and asked if there was anything I might do. She turned her faded eyes, and recognizing me, asked leave of the confessor to speak to me a moment. He assented.

"Where is he?" she asked, softly.

"Juan has been gone twenty days, but where I do not know."

"May God make him happy! Ask him, when you see him, to forgive me. Tell him I love him, though I die for this love. Good-by."

She was weeping. Together we approached the scaffold, and there parted.

At this moment there was a sudden outcry. I saw some one spring from a horse and rush through the encircling crowd of people with a paper. It was Juan, haggard, dusty and travel-worn, but bearing with him a precious document—Gabriela's pardon. Accompanied by several officers, he hurried to the foot of the scaffold. Gabriela was already several steps up, but at the sudden commotion paused, and seeing her lover holding the paper toward her, understood its meaning.

It was too late. With outstretched arms she murmured, "God bless you!" and then, overcome with a mighty revulsion of feeling, sank fainting into the arms of the priest. She never regained consciousness. Her system, overstrained by excitement, had given away, and she died truly a victim to her own passions.

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