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THE NAIL IN THE SKULL

VALENTINE SCOBIE IN THE LOUNGER

How long he slept he did not know, but he was awakened at last by the sound of subdued voices in the room, and opening his eyes he saw from the obscurity of the corner in which he lay, two men standing at the further end of the room near the door. One was Dr. Wilmot, the other the little sexton.

"I knew you were out, and I followed after I heard the sound of your wheels passing my house just now. I wanted to show it to you when you were sure to be alone," said the sexton in mysterious tones, as he drew something forth from under his coat, and handed it to the doctor, who took it in his hands.

"You see, I have been removing the graves."

"Well!" said the doctor half impatiently as he bent to look at the object more closely, for the light was dim. "What is it?"

"Just look on the left side. You will see a nail in it. I took it from your first wife's grave," the man continued, his voice sinking to a hoarse whisper.

Dr. Wilmot started with an exclamation of horror, and the skull, for such it was, dropped from his fingers to the floor. Then as if still more horrified at the noise it made upon striking the floor, he stepped back a little and stood gazing at it as if fascinated. The sexton watched him for a moment and the doctor seemed to quail before his glance. Then the old man stooped and picked up the skull, while the doctor said in a strange unnatural voice, "Come outside; I can't talk here, it's too close," and he pulled open the door which stood ajar and the two men stepped outside.

By this time Hardyngne sat erect, in doubt whether he was awake or dreaming. However, as he hesitated, he heard the low earnest tones of the man outside, and this convinced him of the reality of things. He got up and softly felt his way to his own room. Then he struck a light, and raising the lamp above his head, peered into the recess above the wardrobe. There, sure enough, just visible, was the outline of the wooden box. Not satisfied however, he mounted a chair and took the box down. He opened the lid and there it lay, the grinning skull with the same rusted nail, just on the top of the head, a little to the left. He closed the lid with a bang, and then shoved the box upon its perch above his head.

Then he undressed and went to bed. Shortly after there was a tap at the door and the doctor's voice asked—

"In bed, Hardyngne?"

"Yes, do you want me?"

"No, I'm glad you did not sit up for me. There's no need of anyone going out again. Anybody been after me?"

"No," answered Hardyngne, and the doctor moved away from the door.

CHAPTER IV

For some time after that night, Hardyngne found himself pondering a good deal upon the scene he had witnessed. In the first place he was much puzzled to account for the manner in which the sexton had discovered the presence of the nail in the skull. It was evident that he knew of it, and in that case, he was aware of the deception which had been practiced upon him, in substituting another for the real one, taken from the grave. Also, he had made good use of his knowledge, and for purposes of his own, presumably for extorting money from the doctor, had inserted a nail in another skull. But what occupied his thoughts most was the man-

ner in which the doctor had received the sexton's communication. It certainly looked like conscious guilt, yet it might have been just natural horror at the idea of the thing. Then again, though Dr. Wilmot had certainly the appearance of one whose mind was not at rest, still he did not look like a man capable of cold blooded villainy. Hitherto Mrs. Wilmot had been associated with Hardyngne's thoughts about the horrible deed, and since he came to the house, he had found himself carefully studying her face and character. He felt that the whole thing must come to light sometime however, without any active agency on his part, and he was content to wait. He might have put the thing in the hands of the authorities at first, but then there had been nothing but the suspicions of an ignorant woman to work upon, and he had directed his idle wanderings to the spot, and had taken the first plan that had suggested itself to find out if there was anything in the case. He had seen plainly that unless some mark existed upon the skull it would be folly to attempt to make anything of it after such a lapse of time. Then when he did actually discover a mark, the depth of whose significance was something he had not even imagined, he had experienced a revulsion of feeling, and had wished himself out of it. The circumstances which had followed had been none of his own seeking, and now he had no inclination to act in the matter. What troubled him most was the possession of the skull. Though he had no natural horror of such things (his profession would have cured him of that) still there was certainly something ghastly in the idea of keeping the thing in the house. There was no telling to what it might lead.

Although Hardyngne met May Wilmot day after day, their intimacy did not seem to grow very fast. He found it difficult to make conversation with her. He seldom saw her alone, and in the presence of her stepmother she seemed oppressed by some hidden influence, and as he sometimes caught the cold glitter in the grey eyes momentarily resting upon the face of the shrinking girl, he felt an answering thrill in his own heart, and involuntarily he formed the resolution to stay, if possible near her till something had grown out of the cloud of vague suspicions which overhung the atmosphere of this dreary house. Thus he grew to feel a sort of guardianship over this girl, to regard her as something trusted to him for protection; a feeling naturally grateful to one of his temperament. Moreover, he saw, or fancied he saw, that she too, somehow felt this bond of sympathy between them, that in spite of herself, the chain was shortening link by link and that, without any outward signs, they were being gradually drawn together.

One evening late in the autumn he saw her starting out, as she often did, for a walk. She seemed to be lonely. There were no young people of her own class in the neighborhood, and they had no visitors.

Obedying a sudden impulse, he took his hat and hurried after her. He, too, felt the loneliness of the place, especially now that he was not kept quite so busy. Had there been more friendly intercourse in the house it would have been different.

May did not repulse him when he stepped up beside her, but seemed rather pleased to see him. The evening was chilly, and they walked briskly, talking only upon little general topics of conversation, the remarkably fine autumn, the probability of the near approach of winter and so on. They had taken a road which led them away from the scattered collection of houses which formed the little village. As they turned towards home again, being warmed by the exercise of rapid walking, May slackened her pace and they strolled along more leisurely.

"Do you know, Mr. Hardyngne," she said abruptly, "I have often felt like speaking to you about something. I think I once addressed a letter to you."

Hardyngne started.

"We had an old servant who was very fond of me. She had been with us a long time. Two or three days before she died she got me to bring her an envelope and to address it. I did so and mailed the letter for her. She asked me not to mention it to any one, and I promised. That letter I believe was addressed to you; and ever since you came to the house, I have had a strange sort of feeling that that letter had something to do with your being here. Am I right?"

Timid people when they undertake a thing are apt to carry it through without stopping to think, and though her voice trembled a little she did not hesitate till she had finished.

Hardyngne walked on in silence for a moment. To tell her the whole truth, even to refer to the horrible suspicion

which hung over the house, would be cruel, preposterous, as it was not likely the suspicion of such a thing had ever crossed her mind. Suddenly he stopped and spoke impulsively—"Miss Wilmot it was something more powerful than that letter that brought us two together, you and me. I have felt it from the first. It was an irresistible fate. More than this I dare not say just now, but may I ask you to trust me a little, to let me talk to you once in a while. I believe that now we are mutually aware of the feeling that exists between us, the chain which is drawing us together will be strengthened, and in time—but I must not talk to you yet. Forgive me, Miss Wilmot, if I have frightened you," for he had been speaking impetuously, and he saw she was trembling.

"Will you not take my arm. It is chilly and we will walk more quickly—"

"After all," he broke in suddenly, "I have not said anything I regret as long as you do not, only, I did not mean to speak yet."

After they reached the gate Hardyngne stopped and turned as if to speak, but something in the girl's face deterred him and he refrained from speaking. He understood it at a glance. She was young and her life had been secluded. She had been surprised, a little surprised at the way in which he had spoken, and perhaps did not quite understand. Never mind, that would come later. He smiled a little as he bade her good evening and just touched her hand with a momentary pressure, then he ran lightly up to his room, feeling somehow not altogether displeased with himself nor out of humor with his fate. He stood for a long time at the window, looking out into the moonlight, up the road along which they had walked, fancying he could see amid the shadows which overhung the way, their two forms, and following them through the upward turns and windings of the road, into the dim misty region beyond the horizon.

Awakening from his reverie he saw two more substantial forms go out of the moonlight into the shadow of the house, and straining his eyes he could just see that they stood there for some time: then he heard the outer door open, and the doctor's step in the hall. At the same time the little sexton moved out of the shadow into the moonlight, and hobbled painfully along the road. He had something in his hand which he appeared to be counting over, and for this purpose, he stopped a minute in the middle of the road, and holding his stick under his arm, held something up to the light for a moment, then transferred the whole to his pocket and walked on. Amid the confusion of thoughts that rushed through Hardyngne's mind was one that the old man seemed to walk with difficulty, and had probably about reached the limit of time allotted to him, and he wondered if there were not one in the house who would not regret his being out of the way. After he was in bed Hardyngne found himself following up the ideas which forced themselves into his mind, and as he lay down he involuntarily cast a glance towards the gloomy shadows where lurked the cause of all these suspicions, and he wished it had never been removed from its resting place in the churchyard. Then he thought of May, and again he felt inclined to look on the brighter side of things, for what had brought him to her? Then pleasanter thoughts replaced the gloomy fancies which for a moment had taken possession of his brain. But his dreams were a confused tangle of the whole. He drifted from one thing to another till finally all blended into two shadows which hovered over him—one with the face of May Wilmot, the other with that of the skull, in which the nail showed with ghastly prominence. They still feeling the sense of a presence near him, he opened his eyes upon the gloom and shadows of the darkness. But was it the substance of his dreams that moved in the room? A white robed figure, barely distinguishable through the gloom, came slowly from the far corner where the door was, into the centre of the room, then after standing still for a moment, moved towards the bed and hung over him till his hair, like a black veil in the darkness, fell down to the coverlid, and he felt, rather than saw, the steel like glitter of a pair of cold grey eyes fastened upon his face.

For one moment only, the strange apparition bent over Hardyngne's bed, then turned and glided from the room, leaving him lying there cold as stone. Presently, however, he recovered himself and cursing his own weakness, sprang out of bed and turned the key in his door, saying to himself as he returned to bed "She walks in her sleep of course, but what hateful eyes the woman has. It makes me creep to think of them."

After that, strangely enough he slept soundly till morning.

During the day, as he was sitting alone in the surgery, a man came and asked him to go and see the old sexton, whom he had found lying in his home, ill and helpless. The messenger stated that the old man had asked particularly for Hardyngne, and had insisted upon waiting till Dr. Wilmot had been seen driving away from his office. Hardyngne went immediately, wondering somewhat at the strange summons. He found the sexton suffering from the effects of a shock of paralysis. He was quite helpless, and could only speak with difficulty. Hardyngne found that it was the second attack, and he feared that it would be quickly followed by another and fatal one. He wished to send for Dr. Wilmot, but the old man seemed so distressed when he suggested doing so and looked with such meaning towards the neighbor who was with him that Hardyngne sent the man from the room on some pretense or other, and then asked the sexton if there was anything he wished to say.

"Yes, yes. Don't let the doctor come. I'm afraid of him," he said in a whisper. "I know about the nail in the skull, I saw it in the box that day before you came in. He did it, of course, and I'm afraid of him. You see he might be glad to get rid of me."

"Why do you think he did it?" asked Hardyngne anxiously, as he bent over the dying man.

"Why, he bribed me not to tell, gave me money!" exclaimed the sexton excitedly. "He did it, I know he did. I'm sure of it, and I don't want him here," he cried, making a feeble attempt in his excitement to rise from his pillow.

"I cannot help his coming if he chooses to come," answered Hardyngne "but I'll see that you are not alone."

"Well, he needn't send me any medicine, for I won't take it," he cried, his voice rising to a shrill screech, then breaking completely, while the old man lay for a moment exhausted. Then suddenly he seemed to think of something, and turning his head a little, he peered anxiously into Hardyngne's face. "It wasn't much he gave me. I'm a poor man, a poor man. You had better leave me to die alone. It's not likely I'll ever be able to pay you anything." Hardyngne paid no attention to this, but leaving him as comfortable as possible, made the neighbor promise not to leave the sick man alone, then he left and returned to the office. Dr. Wilmot had returned, and upon being told of the sexton's illness, did not seem much surprised, saying he would go over soon and see him. He returned in a short time, and speaking to Hardyngne, said: "He does not seem to want me near him. You'd better look after him Hardyngne. The old man's getting childish." Hardyngne assented and no more was said on the subject.

The fatal shock came sooner than was expected and the old sexton died. Hardyngne could not altogether dismiss from his mind what the sexton had said about Dr. Wilmot, perhaps because for some reason or other he had grown to have a sort of sympathetic interest in the silent pre-occupied man, and would fain, if not for his own sake, for the sake of the daughter, have stifled the dread suspicions which would sometimes arise in spite of him.

As autumn drifted into winter and nothing further occurred to recall any unpleasant doubts, Hardyngne fancied that he had almost forgotten them and the house seemed less lonely and oppressive. Perhaps it was that there was within it now, a light for him, a cheering presence which served to chase away the gloom; for between him and May Wilmot there now existed something more than a mere fancied attraction. There had been nothing definite said about it between them however, but they now and then found an opportunity for a word or two together, and were content. Hardyngne fancied too that he saw a happier light glowing in May's eyes, that she seemed less timid and more light-hearted than when he had first known her.

Of Mrs. Wilmot he saw little. She seemed to live entirely to herself. She was a model housekeeper. Everything in the house was ordered with the nicest precision. Indeed, to such an extent was this carried, that there was not a corner nor crevice in the house which she did not see herself was carefully swept and dusted. Passing Hardyngne's room one day when the door was open, she noticed a broom and dust cloth lying together. A servant had evidently been using them and left the room for a moment. Mrs. Wilmot took up the broom and winding the cloth loosely about the brush, stood upon a chair and proceeded to stir up a

cloud of dust upon the top of the wardrobe. Not noticing the wooden box behind the cloth, where it stood, near the edge, as Hardyngne had hastily set it one night, with a vigorous sweep of the broom she knocked it off its perch, and it fell rattling to the floor, the contents rolling out upon the carpet. With an exclamation of impatience Mrs. Wilmot got down from the chair, and picked up the skull to replace it in the box. As she did so something arrested her attention. She looked at it steadily for a moment, then with a shriek dashed it to the floor, almost paralyzing the servant, who had entered, and was moving about the room, not paying much attention to what Mrs. Wilmot was doing. Scream after scream rang through the house and in a moment the servants were all in the doorway, standing in open-mouthed horror, gazing at the shrieking woman. Hardyngne pushed his way through them to Mrs. Wilmot, and asked her what was the matter. She pointed to the floor. "There it is, under the bed. I saw it—the nail! Take it away!" As the curtain was lifted the skull looked out at the frightened faces now gathered in the room, and yielding to a common impulse, all retreated to the door. Hardyngne saw at a glance what it meant and he took Mrs. Wilmot's arm and drew her from the room, bidding the women to get her to her bed and to stay with her till the doctor's return. Then he returned to his room and hurriedly replaced the skull in its box upon the top of the wardrobe. He would have given worlds to have found a place for it where neither he nor any one else would see it again, but for the life of him he could not make up his mind to destroy the thing. Some association between it and the girl he loved deterred him from anything which might seem like disrespect to the memory of her dead mother. However, he determined that not another night should pass over his head before it should be returned, at whatever risk, to its legitimate resting place.

Mrs. Wilmot remained in her room all that day, the doctor and one of the women with her.

To May, who returned to the house shortly after her father, Hardyngne explained enough of what had occurred to satisfy her. Towards evening the doctor looking very pale and worried called Hardyngne into the surgery and said—"It is useless to try and conceal it. I have expected this thing for a long time. Mrs. Wilmot is, I fear, hopelessly insane. For some time I have been aware that she has had something on her mind the nature of which I have only lately surmised."

"It had to come sooner or later. What was it, do you know, that startled her? I hardly understand."

"I think she must have been sweeping or dusting the top of the wardrobe in my room, and a box, in which I had some specimens, fell down and scattered on the floor."

"Yes I see. Her mind has been in an unnatural state. It was the room, the room," he repeated, as if to himself, as he turned to go. Hardyngne breathed a sigh of relief that there had been nothing asked about the nature of the specimens which had caused the trouble, and again he resolved to lose no time in getting the skull from the house, so before he went to bed that night he procured a spade, which he left in a convenient place.

Dr. Wilmot and one of the servants remained up with Mrs. Wilmot that night, and the lights were not all put out, nor were the doors locked, so that Hardyngne, watching his chance, had no difficulty in slipping quietly from the house at midnight. He found his spade, and with the gruesome box under his arm, hurried to the churchyard. All was still and silent, and the night, though not dark, lent kindly shadows enough he thought, to cover his movements. He found the soil soft above the grave, which had not been sodded since the removal. There was a crust of frozen earth on top, though which he broke without much difficulty. There had been snow, but it had gone again, and now everything seemed to be favorable. With feverish haste he threw up the soil, and having reached the coffin, drew a chisel from his pocket and raised the lid, took the skull which he found there, and threw it far from him to a corner where the wild rose bushes grew in a tangled mass. Then he put the real one in its place, and closing the coffin, he scraped the earth back to its bed and smoothed it over as best he could. Then he stood up, and wiping his brow, noticed that the snow was beginning to fall, and that in all probability before morning, the evidences of his work would be covered from sight. Scarcely had this thought formed itself in his mind when he was startled by a

voice at his side which asked in grave earnest tones:—

"What does this mean Hardyngne? He had not noticed in the excitement of his efforts, the sounds of approaching footsteps, and turning quickly, he saw standing beside him in the soft grey light, the familiar form of the silent doctor.

CHAPTER VI.

For a moment the two men stood looking at one another in silence. Hardyngne knew not what to say. A moment before he had exulted in the knowledge that at last he had got rid of something which had been a burden on his mind, and now he was confronted by the man who had the best right to question his mysterious actions. "Are you aware, Mr. Hardyngne at hit is the grave of my wife which you are disturbing?"

"I am, Dr. Wilmot, and I acknowledge that you are justified in asking an explanation of my conduct. Perhaps it is better that an explanation should be made and the time has come for it. It is a long story though. We had better return to the house." Once on the way home, Hardyngne noticed that the doctor sighed heavily, but that he showed no other signs of agitation. When they were seated in the house Hardyngne began at the first and gave an account of the letter which he had received from the woman Richards, and of all that had taken place subsequently, not omitting to state that he had been a spectator of what had occurred between the doctor and the sexton, and finishing up by stating the true cause of Mrs. Wilmot's fright.

Dr. Wilmot seemed much moved as the story was related. He was quite pale, and paced up and down the room until it was finished. Then he stood for some minutes, with brows knitted and hands in his pockets, staring at the blank wall.

"At last the silence was broken."

"It is indeed a strange story, Mr. Hardyngne, and to you must seem inexplicable. What your suspicions have been I dare not think, nor can I at present offer any explanation. I can only ask you to let the matter rest for a few days. So far, you have not acted rashly, and I am only asking for a little more time. By trying to investigate the matter you can do no good and will only cause trouble, of which God knows, there has been enough. My life has never been a happy one at best, but the trouble which has been growing upon me of late, and which has, I think, about reached a climax, is something beyond conception, except in the horrible reality."

He turned and looked expectantly at Hardyngne.

"I will do as you ask, Dr. Wilmot, I have certainly no wish to cause you any trouble, far from it, I love your daughter, Dr. Wilmot, and for her sake would willingly forget if possible all that has occurred."

"You love my daughter and would marry her under the cloud which hangs over this house?"

"I love her and would marry her under any circumstances."

"Is May aware of this?"

"I think so, and I hope she is not indifferent to my regard for her, though nothing definite has been said on the subject."

"What if the suspicion of a foul murder should rest upon her father?"

"She is innocent."

"Well, well, Mr. Hardyngne, I can only ask you again, to wait for a few days until I shall return to this painful subject, which I shall do of my own accord. After that you have my permission to address my daughter."

"Thank you, Dr. Wilmot," returned Hardyngne, holding forth his hand which the doctor grasped, then hastily left the room.

During the next two or three days Hardyngne rather avoided meeting May. He scarcely dared to trust himself in her presence. Once only, when he had thought her eyes rested on him rather reproachfully, he found an opportunity of speaking to her alone for a minute.

"Miss Wilmot," he said, "whatever happens, I want you to trust me. I am not free to say any more just now, but remember what I have said." Her eye fell and she colored slightly, but he left her then.

That night, about midnight, Dr. Wilmot knocked at Hardyngne's door and called him into the hall. Quickly drawing on some clothing he appeared at the door. "Mrs. Wilmot has escaped from the house," said the doctor. "I left her to get a little rest myself, and the woman went to sleep."

Without more words the two men hurried from the house. The premises were already being searched by the others. They, two, however, proceeded along the

Children Cry for Pitcher's Castoria.

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