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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Anatomy Lesson

By WILLIAM J. MAKIN

A brief story about a skeleton that grinned, and grinned, and never ceased grinning, as if enjoying a huge joke

PROFESSOR CARTHEW adjusted his pince-nez. His stooping shoulders, tired sad face, and struggling wisp of gray mustache, seemed pathetically incongruous against the bold, upright skeleton that stood by his side flashing a blatant grin at the assembled class.

Young faces, eager and fresh, grouped themselves before the professor. Pristine notebooks were pressed open at the first page. The chattering undercurrent of lively young men and girls reached the professor.

"... a simply gorgeous film. I loved it."

"... watched a perfectly marvelous piece of trephining by Juke and ——"

"Can you manage tea at four o'clock? Oh, do!"

"Ahem!"

Professor Carthew cowed the young people into an indifferent silence. The faces looked up. Pencils and fountainpens were poised. The afternoon lecture on anatomy was to begin.

"Today I intend to depart from my usual procedure in these lessons," said Professor Carthew, wearily. "On the last occasion when we met I discussed the vertebral column in detail. I dare say several of you found it highly technical. I do not intend to weary you again with such matters."

"The old duffer has a date," sniggered one of the pupils. "Wants to get away!"

"But this afternoon," went on the professor, "I want to discuss the skeleton as

a whole, to ask you to deduce, from these bones that stand before you, the sort of fleshy garb that once covered them. In brief, it is the man, not the skeleton, I will tell you about."

Despite the coolness of the afternoon, the students in the leading row noticed with some surprize that the professor's brow was beaded with perspiration. Unusual, in old, dry-as-dust "Bones". Moreover, before he spoke again, Professor Carthew gave a half-fearful glance at the erect, grinning skeleton standing by his side on the raised dais.

"The more literary among you," he went on, "will recall that Hamlet philosophized over the dug-up skull of Yorick, the king's jester. 'A fellow of infinite jest' is how he described the twenty-two bones composing the cranium and face of the thing unearthed."

With a trembling pointer, the professor indicated the skeleton on the stand.

"Here, too, is a fellow of infinite jest—a fool!"

The savage utterance of the words caused several of the students to look up in surprize. One, who was engaged in a crossword puzzle, laid down his pencil.

A strange smile crossed the lecturer's face.

"Perhaps some one among you will tell me what this skeleton suggests?"

His eyes gleamed behind the pince-nez swiveling at the crowd of young faces.

"A best quality specimen, sir," responded one wag. "Probably Austrian

and worth every penny of fifteen guineas."

A snigger went round the lecture room at this boldness. But the smile on the face of Professor Carthew seemed to accept the remark as a compliment.

"A good observation as regards the price, young man," he nodded. "It is a best quality specimen, having a movable spine." A jerk of his pointer, and the bones danced. "But you are wrong as to its country of origin. It happens to be an English skeleton."

He seemed to enjoy the surprize on the faces of the students, for he paused with an actor-like love of the drama and poured out for himself a glass of water from the carafe at his desk.

"But, sir," stammered another student, "doesn't that make it rather rare in medical schools? Was the subject a man who donated his body for medical research?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes," murmured the professor. That smile still played beneath the wisp of gray mustache. "In fact, it is not without interest that the subject and myself had a discussion upon skeletons less than a hour before he became available for medical research."

At this, the class of students sat all attention. Notebooks, for once, were ignored.

"A few moments ago I tagged a Shakespearean label on him—'a fellow of infinite jest.' And so he was in a modern, ineffably boring manner. Actually, he was a surgeon—oh, yes, quite well-known—but famous for his fatuous jokes, his absurd stories at which he laughed so much himself, rather than for his skill with the knife. He had the supreme bedside manner. I have even seen some intelligent patients accept the anesthetic gladly when he was in the midst of one of his interminable funny stories. . . ."

EYES gazed from professor to skeleton, and back again. The front-row students noticed that the beads of perspiration had increased, and that the eyes behind the pince-nez gleamed with hatred.

"With his silly jokes and butcher's hands he had blundered into some sort of successful practise. One day a friend, a very dear friend of mine, was wheeled on an operating-table before him. True, the operation was a delicate one, but one which a clever surgeon with a proper knowledge of anatomy could have brought to a successful issue. The lady—the friend—died.

"I was actually on my way to the nursing-home when the dreadful business happened. And I arrived only to gaze upon her quiet, resigned face, so beautiful even in death. . . ."

Professor Carthew's voice had softened. For a moment, tears dimmed his eyes, only to vanish instantly and be replaced by that deep-seated hatred.

"You students are only yet learning the rudiments of dissection and anatomy," he went on. "To your untrained eyes that surgical operation might have appeared a desperate but vain attempt to save life. As a man who has spent years on anatomical study, the operation revealed itself to me as murder—sheer, blundering murder by a fool with a knife."

The voice was now harsh and damning. Each student was transfixed to his desk. In the silence that followed, the loud ticking of the clock seemed emphasized. Even Professor Carthew gave the clock his customary glance to assess the progress in time of his lecture.

"There were two courses open to me," he went on, in a monotone. "One was to indict the surgeon before the General Medical Council, denounce him as an incompetent blunderer and a danger to the

public, and insist that he be struck off the rolls. It would have created a scandal, brought dishonor on a profession for which I have the highest respect and to which I have given the best years of my life. I should have been hated as a meddling old fool. Above all, it would have dragged the corpse of that very dear friend into the vulgar scrutiny of scandal. There remained the other course. . . ."

He turned from the class and walked a few steps toward the skeleton. He seemed to be regarding it almost affectionately.

"Without a word, I went away from the nursing-home back to my house in Hampstead. A few of you young people have done me the honor at times to call upon me there. I am always delighted to see you, and give you the benefit of what modicum of knowledge I possess on the infinite subject of human anatomy. Some of you will recall my experimental laboratory, as I proudly call it—the shed at the end of my garden. It was to the laboratory I went after leaving the nursing-home.

"An hour later my preparations were made. I entered my house and telephoned to the surgeon in Wimpole Street. I asked him, in as ordinary tone as I could muster at the moment, to call and see me that evening. He seemed surprized, and uncertain whether he could manage it. I insisted. In fact, I made a few anatomical criticisms of that operation over the telephone. He blustered, but the fact that I had seen the body worried him. He agreed to come. I insisted upon absolute secrecy. He must tell no one where he was going that evening. I would meet him at the Underground station near my house. Frightened at the possibility of my threat, he agreed. . . ."

Professor Carthew turned away from the grinning skull, and drank the glass

of water. The tired eyes wavered toward the clock.

"The well-known surgeon arrived—without his bedside manner. No one saw us enter my house. I took care of that.

"When we had seated ourselves, he came straight to the point. He wanted to know what I was going to do. I told him I wanted to talk of anatomy—and skeletons!"

Once again the grim smile.

"Perhaps the students of this class have been surprized on occasions when I appear to have wandered from the subject of my lectures on anatomy. But even the little philosophical reflections are only the result of much study in this fascinating subject. Some of those philosophical reflections I repeated to the surgeon, sitting in my house that evening.

"I pointed out the curious horror that living people have of skeletons; why, I have never been able to understand. Partly, I suppose, it is based on the strange idea that the skeleton is typical of death. But the skeleton is really only man-named. Skeletons have a living, purposeful unity of their own. They can be, as one student pointed out this afternoon, of best quality.

"Actually, of course, man is frightened of the skeleton only because it is a reminder that at the base he is himself shamelessly grotesque. It is this grinning ugliness of bony structure which is hidden by fleshy pomp and pride. Curious that some men should be proud of the flesh and ashamed of the bones. Personally, it is the framework and not the outward show that has always interested me. . . ."

THERE was a gurgle of water as the decanter was brought into play again. Only the professor, with his wavering glance, realized that the clock

gave him less than a quarter of an hour to end his lesson on anatomy. The students might have been skeletons themselves, so rigid did they sit and stare.

"I could see that the surgeon was irritated, puzzled and scared in turn by my talk. But here again, I must ask students to make note of a curious anatomical fact. Whatever expression the fleshy face may register—joy or sorrow, love or hate—you may be certain that the skull itself, those twenty-two bones, are fixed in a hideous grin. As is the subject before you," the professor added in a tone of profound contempt.

"And even as I spoke of my deep love for that dear friend whom his bungling hands and murderous knife had taken from me for ever, I was aware, paradoxically, that both our skulls were grinning at each other. My sorrow left his fleshy face unmoved. Only his eyes were calculating and his disgusting gray matter pondering what action I was going to take. I invited him, casually, to walk across the garden with me and view an anatomical specimen in my laboratory. Wondering a little, but anxious to please, he agreed.

"We passed through the garden and entered the hut. As some of you know, I have several excellent skulls there. I persuaded him to examine one closely—it is a curiously primitive example which I myself dug up from a barrow on Salisbury Plain. I pointed out how even this bronze age skull had undergone two trephining operations, and clever operations they were.

"As he bent closer over the skull, I struck—with a surgeon's knife. I had assessed the position of his heart exactly. It lay, approximately, just here!" The pointer was casually inserted in the skeleton. "In less than a minute that blundering member of our great profession was

dead at my feet. Before the morning, working steadily through the night, I had acquired an excellent new specimen of a skeleton for anatomical demonstration to students."

One of the girl students stifled a scream that was rising in her throat. A gasp of horror went round the room. But not a single student dared rise. They were all rooted. Professor Carthew was blinking in tired fashion at the clock.

"Before we close the lesson for the afternoon," he went on in that same dreadful monotone, "there is one final anatomical fact which I must bring to your notice. It concerns the lower limbs, and in particular, the feet of the subject. As I have told you in previous lectures, the foot consists of the tarsus, the metatarsus, and the five free digits or toes. In articulation they carry the weight of the body. They leave a definite mark in wet soil or similar substances.

"It is with this anatomical fact that I will conclude today. I said that a skeleton may be regarded as a living skeleton. It is so in this case, for the surgeon walking across my garden left a definite impress on his feet. A little over an hour ago those footprints were measured by some rather amateur scientists attached to Scotland Yard. They were found to fit, exactly, the shoes of the missing surgeon.

"It appears that one of that curious human species of loafers, men who hang about streets listlessly and apparently half alive, had seen me meet the surgeon at the Underground station. I was known to him; the surgeon he recognized from a photograph that was shown him. I suppose in the ordinary way, a professor of anatomy might be the last person to be suspected of murder. What I have done, however, is to rid the profession of a most undesirable practitioner."

PROFESSOR CARTHEW drained the glass at one gulp. A spasm of pain twitched his features, and he swayed a little. Recovering himself, he gave a half-laugh of apology. He still faced that group of students, apparently oblivious of the horrified gaze that had fixed their young, eager features. He seemed equally oblivious to the opening of the door of the lecture room, and the entry of a powerfully built man with two constables in the rear.

"Marmaduke Arthur Carthew!" began the new entrant. "I am Inspector Rollins of Scotland Yard, and I hold a warrant for your arrest on a charge of wilful murder against——"

But the professor had held up his

hand as though he would check some eager student in spate.

"Finally, I would say that it is my sincere wish—I have stated it in my will—that my own body be used for dissection purposes, and that my skeleton be used for anatomy lessons by my successor. But please do not forget, dear students, that however much my face may seem to gleam with somber vanity or vulgar vengeance, the skull beneath is laughing for ever."

And with an exuding sigh he crumpled suddenly at the bony feet of the subject he had lectured upon. His hand still clutched the glass, from which came a faint aroma of almonds.

The anatomy lesson was ended.