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THE SKELETON IN THE CLOSET

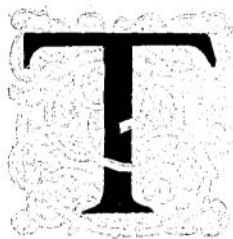
THE SKELETON
IN THE CLOSET
By CLARENCE S.
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Clarence S. Darrow

THE SKELETON IN THE CLOSET



THE closet has so long been allotted to the skeleton that we have come to regard this room as its fit and natural home ; it has been given over to this guest because it is the darkest, the closest and least conspicuous in the house. The door can be securely fastened and only now and then can the grating bones

be heard by the world outside. Still, however secluded and unused this guest chamber seems to be, and however carefully we bolt the door and darken every chink and crevice in the walls, we are ever conscious that the occupant is there, and will remain until the house is closed, and the last tenant has departed, never to return. The very fact that we try so hard to keep the skeleton in its proper room, makes it the more impossible to forget that it is there. Now and then we awake with a start at the thought of what might happen should it break the door and

wander through the house, and then stray out into the wide world, and tell all the peaceful, trusting neighbors from what house it stole away; and yet we are somehow conscious that the rumor of its dread presence has already traveled as far as we are known. Man is a wonderfully adaptable animal; he fits himself easily into the environment where he is placed. He passes from infancy to childhood and from childhood to boyhood as smoothly as the placid river flows to the waiting sea. Every circumstance and surrounding of his life seems to have been

made for him. Suddenly a new desire takes possession of his soul; he turns his back on the home of his childhood days and goes out alone. In a little time a new family is reared about him, and he forgets the group that clustered round his father's hearth. He may lose a leg or a fortune, and he soon conforms to his changed condition and life goes on as naturally and as easily as before. A child is born beneath his roof; it takes a place within his heart and home, and in a little while he can scarcely think of the day it was not there. Death comes,

and a member of his little band is carried out, but time drops its healing balm upon the wounds and life goes on almost unconscious that the dead has ever lived. But while we adjust ourselves naturally to all things living and to ever varying scenes, the skeleton in the closet is always an intruder, no matter how long it may have dwelt beneath the roof. Even though we may forget its actual presence for a little time, still no scene is so perfect and no enjoyment so great but we feel a cloud casting its shadow across our happiness or the

weight of some burden on our soul; and when we stop to ask the cause, the grinning skelton reminds us that it is with us even here.

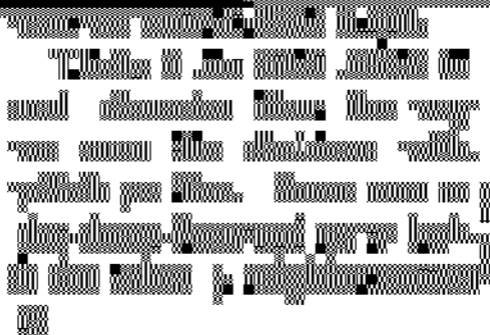
This spectre stands quite apart from the other sorrows of our life; age seems powerless to forget, and time will not bring its ever-fresh, recurring scenes to erase the memory of the past. This is not because the skeleton is really such a dreadful guest. The kind and loving ivy creeps tenderly around each yawning scar and crumbling stone, until the whole ruin is covered with a lovely green. The de-

caying pile stands free and open to the sun and rain and air. It does not hide its head or apologize for the blemishes and seams that mark its face, and a kind, forgiving nature takes the ruin, scars and all, and blends these with her softening years and lovely face into a beautiful harmonious whole; but unlike the ruin, the skeleton in the closet is a neglected, outcast child. With every breath we insist that there is nothing in the room. We refuse to take it to our hearts and homes and acknowledge it as our own. We seek to strangle it to death, and

each fresh attempt not only shows our murderous design, but proves that the skeleton is not a pulseless thing but is endowed with immortal life. The brighter the fire-light that glows around our hearth, the more desolate and drear sounds the wail of the wind outside, for through its cold blasts wanders the outcast, whose rightful place is in the brightest corner of the room.

Our constant annoyance and sorrow at this dread presence is not caused by the way the skeleton behaves to us, but from the way we treat our guest. If we looked it squarely

in its grinning skull, it might not seem so very loathsome to the sight. It has the right to grin. It may be but a grim smile over the consciousness that it has sounded the last sorrow and that henceforth no greater evils are in store; it may be a mocking, sardonic grin at the thought of our discomfiture over its unwelcome



their way. If perchance any fear of discovery is felt, they stand guard outside and solemnly protest that there is nothing in the room. Their anxiety and haste plainly show fear lest their hated guest shall reveal its face; and of course there rises in the neighbor's mind a vision of a skeleton more horrible by far than the one inside the door or than anyone can be. If the luckless jailer really fears that the rattle of the prisoner's bones has been heard outside, he feels it his duty to carefully explain or tediously cover up every detail and circumstance that caused

the presence of the spectre in the house. All this can only show that the guest is terrible to behold or that the jailer is so poor and weak that he himself is a helpless prisoner to his foolish pride and unmanly fear. It can only serve to emphasize the presence he tries so vainly to deny. There are also those who know that their skeleton has been seen, or who having lost all else but this persistent, grinning guest, drag it out and parade it in the world to gain the sympathy or the money of their neighbors and their friends, like the crippled beggar standing on the corner

holding out his hat to every passer-by. The true man neither guiltily conceals nor anxiously explains nor vulgarly parades. He lives his life the best he can, and lets it stand for what it is. A thousand idle tales may be true or false. One may have seen but certain things, and placed him with the saints. Another little soul, who never felt the breadth and depth of human life, may have seen his scars alone, and cast him out. But standing by his side, or clasping his strong, sympathetic hand, no one thinks of halos or scars or asks an explanation of this or that, for in his whole

being is felt the divine presence of a great soul, who has lived and loved, sinned and suffered, and been strengthened and purified by all.

The skeleton is really kind that it only grins as we look it in the face. Of all our household it has received the hardest treatment at our hands. It has helped us more than any of the rest, and been locked in the closet for its pains. It may perchance have come at our own invitation, bringing us the keenest, wildest joy our life had ever known. We gladly drained the pleasure to the dregs, and then coolly locked

the memory close in the darkest hole that we could find
The day it came, has well
nigh faded from our minds,
and the mad, wild joy we
knew can never more be
wakened from the burned-out
passions of the past, but the
skeleton, which rose up grim
and ghastly from the dying
flame, remains to mock and
jeer and make us sad. And now
when the day is spent and the
cup is drained, we charge the
poor spectre with our lasting
pain, and forget the joy it
brought. We look with dread
at these mocking, grinning
bones, which we cannot drive

away, and we forget the time, long, long ago, when those dry sticks were covered up with beautiful and tempting flesh.

It may be that we shall always shudder as we hear the rattle of the bones when we pass the closet door, but in justice to the inmate, we should give him credit for the joys of long ago. And this brings us back to the old question of the balancing of pain and pleasure, good and evil, right and wrong. It may be that in the mysterious adjustment of nature's balances, a moment of supreme bliss will outweigh an eternity

of pain. In the infinite economy, which life counted for the more, — that of Napoleon, or the poor French peasant that passed through an obscure existence to an unknown grave? The brief glory of Austerlitz was followed by the bitterness of Waterloo, and the long silence of an exile's life, while the peasant trod his short path without ambition, and filled a nameless grave without regret. Which is the greater and finer, the blameless life of the patient brute, or the winding, devious path of a human soul? It is only the dull level that brings no sorrow or regret. It is a

sterile soil where no weeds will grow, and a bare closet where no skeleton will dwell.

Neither should we remember the skeleton only for the joy it brought; from the day it came, it has been the greatest benefactor that our life has known. When the mad delirium had passed away, and the last lingering fragrance was almost spent, this despised skeleton remained as the sole companion, whose presence should forever bind us back to those feelings that were fresh and true and straight from nature's heart, and that world which once was green and young and

filled with pulsing life. As the shadows gather round our head, and our once-straying feet fall mechanically into the narrow path so straight and even at the further end, we may shudder now and then at the thought of the grim skeleton whose life is so far removed from our sober later selves; but with the shudder comes a spark, a flash of that great, natural light and heat that once possessed this tottering frame, and gave a glow of feeling and a strength of purpose so deep and all-controlling that the artificial world seems no more than a dim candle

shining by the glorious sun.

It is the exhausted emotions of age, which men call prudence, that are ever warning youth of the follies of its sins. It is the grinning skeleton, speaking truly from the memory of other days, that insists that life's morning held the halcyon hours. De

and mumbling grey-beards endorse the excellence and wisdom of the sermons that they preach. They are not wise enough to know that their prattle is more vain and foolish than the babblings of their childhood days. It was the growing, vital sap of life that made them children years ago; it is the icy, palsying touch of age that makes them babbling, preaching children once again. As well might the calm and placid lake teach the beauty of repose to the boiling, seething cataract, that thunders down Niagara's gulf. When the troubled waters shall have reach-

ed the lake they shall be placid too. Nature is wiser far than man. She makes the first childhood precede the second. If the age of prudence came with youth, it would be a dull and prosy world for a little time; then life would be extinct upon the earth and death triumphant over all.

But these are the smallest reasons why we should venerate the neglected skeleton, which we have ruthlessly cast into the closet as if it were a hideous thing. This uncanny skeleton, ever thrusting its unwelcome bones into our presence and our lives, has been the most

patient, persistent, constant teacher that all our years have known. We look backward through the long dim vista of the past, back to the little trusting child that once nestled on its mother's breast and from whose loving lips and gentle soul it first was told of life, its temptations and its sins; backward to her, whose whole thought was a benediction to the life that was once a portion of herself. We remember still this mother's words teaching us the way to live and telling us the way to die. We always knew that no selfish thought inspired a single word she said

and yet time and time again we strayed and wandered from the path she pointed out. We could not keep the road and after a while we did not try. Again our teacher told us of the path. He, too, was good and kind and knew the way we ought to go, and showed us all the bad results of sin, and still we stumbled on. The preacher came and told us of the beautiful heaven, straight at the other end of the narrow path, and the yawning gulf of hell to which our shifting footsteps led; but we heeded not his solemn tones, though they seemed to come with the au-

thority of God himself. As the years went on, our mother's voice was stilled, the teacher's words were hushed, the preacher's threats became an empty, hollow sound; and in their place came the grinning skeleton, born of our own desires and deeds; less loving than the gentle mother, more real and life-like than the teacher, saner and truer than the preacher's idle words. It was ever present and persistent; it was a portion of our very selves.

We detested and feared the hated thing; we locked it in the closet, and denied that it was there; but through the bright-

ness of the day and the long and silent watches of the night, we heard its rattling bones, and felt its presence at our side. No teacher of our youth was like that grim and ghastly skeleton, which we tried to hide away. The schoolmaster of our early life took our fresh, young, plastic minds and sought to crowd them full of useless, unrelated facts that served no purpose through the years that were to come. These lessons that our teacher made us learn by rote filled so small a portion of our daily lives that most of them were forgotten when the school-house door was closed.

When now and then we found some use for a trifling thing that we had learned through years at school, we were surprised to know that the pedagogue had taught us even this. In those early days it seemed to us that life would consist of one long examination in which we should be asked the names of states, the rule of three, and the words the Romans used for this and that. All that we were taught of the great world outside and the problem that would one day try our souls, was learned from the copy books where we wrote the same old maxim until all the

paper was used up. In after years, we learned that, while the copy books might have taught us how to write in a stilted, unused hand, still all its maxims were untrue.

We left the school as ignorant of life as we commenced, nay, we might more easily have learned its lesson without the false, misleading theories we were taught were true. When the doors were opened and the wide world met us face to face, we tested what we learned, and found it false, and then we blundered on alone. We were taught by life that the fire and vigor of

our younger years could not be governed by the platitudes of age. Nature was ever present with her strong and earthly grasp, her keen desires, her white hot flame. We learned the precepts of the books, but we lived the life that nature taught.

Our pathetic blunders and mistakes, and the skeleton that followed in their wake, remained to teach us what was false and point to what was true. This grim, persistent teacher made but little of the unimportant facts that the schoolmaster sought to make us learn, and it laughed to

scorn the preacher's doctrine, that in some way we could avoid the results of our mistakes and sins. It did not preach, it took its place beside us as another self and by its presence sought to make us know that we could not be at peace until we clasped it to our breast and freely accepted the unwelcome thing as a portion of our lives.

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uncertain memory of the past, whose voice had long since died away; but the skeleton in the closet never wearied nor grew old. It ever made us learn again the lesson we would fain forget; opened at each succeeding period of our lives the pages we would gladly put away, until, at last, the ripening touch of time and the spectre's constant presence made us know. From the day it came beneath our roof, it remained the liveliest, wisest, most persistent member of the family group, the tireless, watchful teacher, who would neither sleep nor allow its

pupil to forget.

It may be that there are lives so barren and uneventful that this guest passes ever by their door, but unfortunate indeed is that abode where it will not dwell. The wide vistas can be seen only from the mountain top, and the infinite depths of life can be sounded only by the soul that has been softened and hallowed by the sanctifying touch of misery and sin.

Life is a never-ending school, and the really important lessons all tend to teach man his proper relation to the environment where he must live.

With wild ambitions and desires untamed, we are spawned out into a shoreless sea of moving molecules of life, each separate atom journeying on an unknown course, regardless of the countless other lives it meets as it blindly rushes on; no lights nor headlands stand to point the proper way the voyager should take, he is left to sail an untried bark across an angry sea. If no disaster should befall, it does not show that the traveler is wise or good, but that his ambitions and desires are few or he has kept close inside the harbor line. At first we seek to swim

the flood, to scale the rocky heights, to clutch the twinkling stars. Of course we fail and fall, and the scars our passions and ambitions leave, remain, though all our particles are made anew year after year. We learn at last to leave the stars to shine where they belong, to take all things as they are and adjust our lives to what must be.

The philosophy of life can come only from those experiences that leave lasting scars and results that will not die. Rather than seek to cover up these gaping wounds, we should accept with grace the tales

they tell, and show them as trophies of the strife we have passed through. Those scars are honorable that have brought our lives into greater harmony with the universal power. For resist it as we will, this infinite, loving presence will ever claim us as a portion of its self until our smallest fragments return once more to earth, and are united with the elements from which we came.

21 No life can be rounded and complete without the education that the skeleton alone can give. Until it came we never knew the capacities of the human soul. We had learned

by rote to be forgiving, kind and true. But the anguish of the human soul cannot be told—it must be felt or never known. That charity born of true comradeship, which is the highest and holiest sentiment of life, can be taught by the skeleton alone. The self-righteous, who prate of forgiveness to their fellow men and who look down upon their sinning brothers from above, are hypocrites or fools. They either have not lived or else desire to pass for something they are not. No one can understand the devious, miry paths trodden by another soul unless he himself has

wandered through the night.

Those placid, human lives that have moved along a narrow, even path; that learned by rote the lessons that the churches and the schools have ever taught; whose perfection consists in refraining from doing certain things in certain ways; who never had a noble thought or felt a great desire to help their fellow men — those blameless, aimless, worthless souls, are neither good nor bad. They neither feel nor think; no skeleton would deem it worth its while to come inside their door.

The world judges the con-

duct of youth by the standards of age. Even when due allowance is made for the inexperience and haste of the young, it is assumed that youth and age are measured by the calendar alone. Few have ever been wise enough to know that every passion and circumstance must be fully weighed, before an honest verdict can be written down; and that therefore only the infinite can judge a human soul.

Though accursed, doubted, and despised, Nature ever persists in her relentless plan. She would make us learn the lessons that youth so easily for-

gets. She finds us headstrong, unreasoning, and moved by the same feelings that sway the brute. She decrees that every act, however blind or wilful, must leave its consequences on our lives, and these immortal consequences we treat as skeletons and lock them up. But these uncanny specters wrap us closely in their bony arms; they ever peer with sightless eyes into our soul; they are with us if we sleep or wake, and their persistent presence will not let us sleep. It is the hated, imprisoned skeleton that we vainly sought to hide away, that takes an untamed, fiery soul

within its cruel, loving clasp, and holds it closely in its unforgiving grasp until the vain longings and wild desires of youth are subdued, and cooled, and the deeper harmonies of life are learned. It is the hated skeleton that finds within our breast a heart of flint and takes this hard and pulseless thing and scars and twists and melts it in a thousand tortuous ways until the stony mass is purged and softened and is sensitive to every touch.

It is this same despised skeleton that finds us vain and boastful and critical of others' sins, that watches every word

we speak and even each unuttered thought; it is with us when we tightly draw our robes and pass our fellow on the other side; it hears us when we seek to show how good we are by boasting of our neighbor's sins; for every spot of black or red that we see upon another's robes, it points its bony fingers to a scar upon our heart, to remind us that we are like the rest; and the same finger ever points us to our wounds until we feel and understand that the clay the Master used for us was as weak and poor as that from which he made the rest.

However blind and stubborn we may be, however long we deny the lesson that the skeleton would teach, still it will not let us go until with perfect peace and harmony we look at all the present and the past, at all that was, and all that is, and feel no regrets for what is gone, and no fears for what must come. It may be that our stubborn, stiff-necked soul will still persist until the hair is white and the heavy shadows hang about our heads, but the skeleton with his soothing, softening ally, time, sits with the last watchers at our suffering bed, and

goes if need be, to the silent grave, where alike the darkest crimson spot and the softest, purest clay are reunited once again with the loving, universal mother who has forgiven all and conquered all. It matters not how high we seem to climb, or what the careless world may think for good or ill. It matters not how many small ambitions we may seem to have achieved. Even the unworthy cannot be forever soothed by the hollow voice of fame. All triumphs are futile without the victory over self; and when the triumph over self is won, there are no

more battles to be fought, for all the world is then at peace. It is the skeleton in the closet pointing ever to the mistakes and maladjustments of our past, the skeleton standing there before our gaze that makes us still remember where our lives fell short; that teaches us so slowly but so surely to turn from the unworthy victories and the dire defeats of life to the mastery of ourselves. It is the skeleton from whom we learn that we can live without the world, but not without ourselves.

Without the skeleton we could never feel another's sor-

row, or know another's pain. Philosophy and theology cannot tell us how another's life became a hopeless wreck. It is ourselves alone that reveals the precipice along which every footpath leads. It is from life we learn that it is but an accident when we fall, and equally an accident when we keep the path. The pupil of the schools may look down with pitying glance upon the unfortunate victim of what seems to be his sin. He may point to a love that will forgive and kindly plead with him to take another path, but the wayfarer that the skeleton has taught will

clasp this fellow mortal to his heart, for in his face he sees but the reflection of himself. The wise and good may forgive the evil and the wrong, but only the sinner knows that there is no sin.

The charity that is born of life and sin is not fine because of its effect on some one else, but for what it does for us. True charity is only the sense of the kinship of all living things. This is the charity that neither humiliates nor offends. It is the sense that brings a new meaning to life and a new purpose to the soul.

Let us do simple justice to

this neglected, outcast guest, the useful, faithful teacher of our lives. Let us open the closet door, and let the skeleton come out, and lock the schoolmaster in its place. Let us leave this faithful friend to roam freely at its will. Let us look it squarely in the face with neither fear or shame, but with gratitude for the lessons it has taught. It may be that the jeering crowd will point in scorn as they see us with the grewsome figure at our side, but when we fully learn the lesson that it came to teach, we shall need to look no more without for the ap-

proval or disapproval of our acts, but seek to satisfy ourselves alone. Let us place a new chair beside the hearth, in the cosiest nook, and bid the skeleton take its place as the worthiest guest. Let us neither parade nor hide our new-found friend, but treat it as a fact of life—a fact that is, a fact that had the right to be, and a fact that taught us how to find ourselves. Let us not forget the parents, who watch us in our youth, and the friends that were ever good and true. But above all, let us remember this grim and silent teacher, who never neglected or forgot, who

showed us life as only it could show, who opened up new vistas to our soul, who touched our human hearts, who made us know and love our fellow-man, who softened and mellowed and purified our souls until we felt the kinship that we bore to all living things. Until it came we knew only the surface of the world. Before it came, we had tasted of the shallow cup of joy and the bitter cup of pain, but we needed this to teach us from the anguish of the soul that there is a depth profound and great, where pain and pleasure both are one. That there is a

life so deep and true that earth's rewards and penalties alike are but a hollow show; that there is a conquest of ourselves, which brings perfect peace and perfect rest.