Story of an Obstinate Corpse

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Virgil Hoyt is a photographer's assistant up at St. Paul, and enjoys his work without being consumed by it. He has been in search of the picturesque all over the West and hundreds of miles to the north, in Canada, and can speak three or four Indian dialects and put a canoe through the rapids. That is to say, he is a man of adventure, and no dreamer. He can fight well and shoot better, and swim so as to put up a winning race with the Indian boys, and he can sit in the saddle all day and not worry about it to−morrow.

Wherever he goes, he carries a camera.

"The world," Hoyt is in the habit of saying to those who sit with him when he smokes his pipe, "was created in six days to be photographed. Man — and particularly woman — was made for the same purpose. Clouds are not made to give moisture nor trees to cast shade. They have been created in order to give the camera obscura something to do."

In short, Virgil Hoyt's view of the world is whimsical, and he likes to be bothered neither with the disagreeable nor the mysterious. That is the reason he loathes and detests going to a house of mourning to photograph a corpse. The bad taste of it offends him, but above all, he doesn't like the necessity of shouldering, even for a few moments, a part of the burden of sorrow which belongs to some one else. He dislikes sorrow, and would willingly canoe five hundred miles up the cold Canadian rivers to get rid of it. Nevertheless, as assistant photographer, it is often his duty to do this very kind of thing.

Not long ago he was sent for by a rich Jewish family to photograph the remains of the mother, who had just died. He was put out, but he was only an assistant, and he went. He was taken to the front parlor, where the dead woman lay in her coffin. It was evident to him that there was some excitement in the household, and that a discussion was going on. But Hoyt said to himself that it didn't concern him, and he therefore paid no attention to it.

The daughter wanted the coffin turned on end in order that the corpse might face the camera properly, but Hoyt said he could overcome the recumbent attitude and make it appear that the face was taken in the position it would naturally hold in life, and so they went out and left him alone with the dead.

The face of the deceased was a strong and positive one, such as may often be seen among Jewish matrons. Hoyt regarded it with some admiration, thinking to himself that she was a woman who had known what she wanted, and who, once having made up her mind, would prove immovable. Such a character appealed to Hoyt. He reflected that he might have married if only he could have found a woman with strength of character sufficient to disagree with him. There was a strand of hair out of place on the dead woman's brow, and he gently pushed it back. A bud lifted its head too high from among the roses on her breast and spoiled the contour of the chin, so he broke it off. He remembered these things later with keen distinctness, and that his hand touched her chill face two or three times in the making of his arrangements.

Then he took the impression, and left the house.

He was busy at the time with some railroad work, and several days passed before he found opportunity to develop the plates. He took them from the bath in which they had lain with a number of others, and went energetically to work upon them, whistling some very saucy songs he had learned of the guide in the Red River country, and trying to forget that the face which was.presently to appear was that of a dead woman. He had used three plates as a precaution against accident, and they came up well. But as they developed, he became aware of the existence of something in the photograph which had not been apparent to his eye in the subject. He was irritated, and without attempting to face the mystery, he made a few prints and laid them aside, ardently hoping that by some chance they would never be called for.

However, as luck would have it, — and Hoyt's luck never had been good, — his employer asked one day what had become of those photographs. Hoyt tried to evade making an answer, but the effort was futile, and he had to get out the finished prints and exhibit them. The older man sat staring at them a long time.

"Hoyt," he said, "you're a young man, and very likely you have never seen anything like this before. But I have. Not exactly the same thing, perhaps, but similar phenomena have come my way a number of times since I went in the business, and I want to tell you there are things in heaven and earth not dreamt of —"

"Oh, I know all that tommy−rot," cried Hoyt, angrily, "but when anything happens I want to know the reason why and how it is done."

"All right," answered his employer, "then you might explain why and how the sun rises."

But he humored the young man sufficiently to examine with him the baths in which the plates were submerged, and the plates themselves. All was as it should be; but the mystery was there, and could not be done away with.

Hoyt hoped against hope that the friends of the dead woman would somehow forget about the photographs; but the idea was unreasonable, and one day, as a matter of course, the daughter appeared and asked to see the pictures of her mother.

"Well, to tell the truth," stammered Hoyt, "they didn't come out quite — quite as well as we could wish."

"But let me see them," persisted the lady. "I'd like to look at them anyhow."

"Well, now," said Hoyt, trying to be soothing, as he believed it was always best to be with women, — to tell the truth he was an ignoramus where women were concerned, — "I think it would be better if you didn't look at them. There are reasons why —" he ambled on like this, stupid man that he was, till the lady naturally insisted upon seeing the pictures without a moment's delay.

So poor Hoyt brought them out and placed them in her hand, and then ran for the water pitcher, and had to be at the bother of bathing her forehead to keep her from fainting.

For what the lady saw was this: Over face and flowers and the head of the coffin fell a thick veil, the edges of which touched the floor in some places. It covered the features so well that not a hint of them was visible.

"There was nothing over mother's face!" cried the lady at length.

"Not a thing," acquiesced Hoyt. "I know, because I had occasion to touch her face just before I took the picture. I put some of her hair back from her brow."

"What does it mean, then?" asked the lady.

"You know better than I. There is no explanation in science. Perhaps there is some in — in psychology."

"Well," said the young woman, stammering a little and coloring, "mother was a good woman, but she always wanted her own way, and she always had it, too."

"Yes."

"And she never would have her picture taken. She didn't admire her own appearance. She said no one should ever see a picture of her."."So?" said Hoyt, meditatively. "Well, she's kept her word, hasn't she?"

The two stood looking at the photographs for a time. Then Hoyt pointed to the open blaze in the grate.

"Throw them in," he commanded. "Don't let your father see them — don't keep them yourself.

They wouldn't be agreeable things to keep."

"That's true enough," admitted the lady. And she threw them in the fire. Then Virgil Hoyt brought out the plates and broke them before her eyes.

And that was the end of it — except that Hoyt sometimes tells the story to those who sit beside him when his pipe is lighted.