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Barbed Wire and Brown Skulls

LOREN EISELEY

I

ARCHAEOLOGISTS, during the course of their lives, see and hear many strange things, but the fact that they are scientific men keeps them for the most part silent. They have good, if not superior, rationalizations for the things they do. No layman would dare impugn their motives. I, for example, have a certain number of skulls in my possession. As I write I can see four on the shelf above me. At least two are hidden in my filing cabinet, and there is a beautiful fragment on my desk which is often fondled by visitors who are unaware of its human significance.

Now as it happens I am fortunate. I practice a trade which enables me to keep these objects about in a perfectly logical and open manner. I have not murdered to possess them, and if one or two were acquired in dark and musty places, my motives, as I have hinted, are beyond reproach. As an archaeologist I can be both a good citizen and a frequenter of graveyards.

It was different in the case of the man who finally led me to question my own motives as a skull collector. He was a lawyer, but that, perhaps has little to do with the tale. I knew him as an austere, high-collared member of the bar—a moral and upright citizen—but that, I am afraid, has little to do with it either. The truth is that the gentleman left a box.

He had died, and after the passage of a certain number of months during which the box either lay undiscovered in his attic or, as is more likely, circulated uneasily through the hands of his heirs, I received a call about it. There was nothing unusual in this. I was simply not a policeman. When you are the heir to a considerable estate and unfortunately also have a box to be disposed of, you never go to a policeman. You go instead to an archaeologist. He is apt to be more understanding of human frailty, less prone to dark suspicions than a police officer, and above all, he will relieve you of the box.

If you have ever wandered the streets of a strange city with a

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parcel of this nature, you will appreciate the fact that there are very few human beings who can be trusted to relieve you of such a burden without making some hideous public commotion. Naturally you wish to avoid this. There are only two solutions: bury the box (an act which can lead to serious complications, including the suggestion of guilt) or find an archaeologist, smiling trustingly, and deposit it in his arms.

The heirs in this case pursued the inevitable pathway. They came to me. The legal gentleman and I had had mutual friends. My profession was known. Perhaps the property was really mine. Attics, you know, and the things that get into them. A loan perhaps? Some lodge doings?

I preserved a noncommittal air.

“Uncle Tobias was a church man. He would not tolerate—”

Yes, I said, I knew that.

A nephew toyed uneasily with the strings of the box. “It is very unlikely that his profession would have brought him into contact with—?”

“And him a lawyer?” I said. “Nothing likelier.”

The niece’s hands twisted. “Show him,” she prompted.

It was the real thing, of course, and no lodge fake. As fine a skull as I’ve ever fondled.

“You recognize it?” they cried hopefully. “We are glad to restore it to your collection.” Almost they started up.

“Hmmm,” I said. They subsided nervously. “The jaw, you see. It doesn’t—”

“Doesn’t what?” the nephew challenged. “I’m sure it’s just like you loaned it to him.”

“It’s not mine,” I said bluntly, “and besides that I’ll tell you something. There are two of them—individually represented, I mean. The jaw doesn’t fit the skull. It belonged to someone else. You can see by the color it’s out of a different grave.”

“Two of them,” murmured the niece.

“Out of a different grave,” repeated the nephew.

I waited patiently. After a time he came to the point. Some see it more rapidly than others.

“I guess Uncle Tobias was—uh—uh—a collector,” he said. “We should now like to present his collection to you—or your institution—anonymously, of course.”

"Of course," I said. "Would you like a receipt? Would you like to take the box back with you?"

"Thank you, no," said the niece. "You're too kind. And it will be an anonymous gift?"

"We have many of them," I said. "Many of them."

As they went down the steps I saw them walking more lightly. Their arms swung better without the burden. They ran to the car at the curb. On the desk the skull waited. It was a rich old brown, I saw as my hand went over it—a rich old mahogany brown. They needn't have been so jittery—that skull had been hundreds of years underground when Uncle Tobias was born. But where had he got it—and that jaw from another body?

"There's no accounting," I said, "for tastes. Tobias must have been a collector." I said it disapprovingly to the nearest cabinet. Then I picked the skull up and put it inside. I was not, you see, a genuine collector. My motivations were purely scientific and unemotional.

Or were they? I went back to the desk and sat down. I could see Uncle Tobias's long-hidden relic staring back vacantly at me through the glass door of the cabinet. It would never tell its secret, but it had one. It had a secret and so had Uncle Tobias. And I? Perhaps I was a keeper of secrets. Or of orphans, I thought, as my eyes ran along the shelf overhead. And at last I knew where it had begun. Behind the steady chipping of the pick that began to sound in my ears was another sound—the creaking of weathered timbers and the uneasy movement of stormy air in a closed place. That would be it, I thought suddenly—the heads in Hagerty's barn.

II

When Grandma was alone in the kitchen we used to bake heads together in the kitchen stove. When I first approached her on this matter she naturally demurred, but in the end her cooking enthusiasm got the better of her and she would line them up like biscuits in a pie tin and put them in the oven. It was before the days of Charles Addams and we never conceived of ourselves as monsters. It is probably true, however, that it was at this time I developed a mild antipathy for the normal human skull.

This was not my grandmother's fault. In fact, at times, out of some lingering religious scruple she would protest the nature of some of the heads in the oven—opening the door now and then and peering in, partly to see that they were properly done and partly to grumble over their strangeness.

They were clay, burnt clay, and modeled as well as a boy could model skulls he had never handled. Some of them had matchstick teeth or bits of pearl shell from broken buttons. The eyes were the hollow eyes of skulls and the mandibles were shaped as I thought they should be shaped, from drawings in the red-brick museum that I frequented. As for the cranium itself, practically everything I made was slope-browed and primitive. Even today I am apt to be faintly repelled by skulls with no brow ridges or teeth of too delicate a cast.

"Mind you," Grandma would protest, tapping me with a roasting fork, "this is getting out of hand. Them's no ordinary heads in there and no young'un can tell me so. They've got that *look*, they have. That Darwin look. You be staying out of that building now. There's things there wasn't intended to be seen—not by anybody.

"You've got to stop it, youngster," she would say finally and swing the range door shut with a great clang. "You've got to stop it 'fore the Devil gets you by the foot. That little one there looks no more'n half a man. Where'd you find him, boy? Speak out now. Not from any book in this house, I'll warrant."

"No Grandma, honest not."

"Where then?"

"The room, Grandma, the room in the museum. I climbed up on the railing and looked close. His head was just like that—no forehead—and there was a big card with long words, and there was another head—ordinary—a plain old ordinary head beside him—"

"That's enough, boy, that's enough. They're done now. Get 'em out of the house. Take 'em away. Out of doors now. And don't touch 'em till they cool."

I never did. When they were cool enough, I put them in a little bag I carried and then I went halfway down the block to Haggerty's barn. It was an old sagging weatherbeaten stable, locked

up and unused. I knew where a board could be edged aside, however, and there was just room enough to scrape in and let the board drop in place behind me. I always waited then until my eyes were adjusted to the light that came in through cracks and knotholes. In the spring when the light came in through the leaves outside it made a kind of green-lit secrecy.

Then I would take the bag of heads in my teeth and climb by way of some nailed crosspieces way up into the shadows under the roof. There was a half-loft up there—pretty rickety, but it would still bear a boy's weight. I could see after a while, even in that light, and then I would open the bag and take out the heads.

No one but Grandma and I ever saw them. Though I strove in my modelings for painstaking accuracy, it was only because without it the things seemed less real, less alive somehow. They were smaller than life, the size of big marbles, perhaps. Nevertheless they had a peculiar significance to me, a kind of being—the *anima* that exists in all properly shaped miniatures.

Up there under the barn roof I laid them out in little rows along the cross-beams. It was my museum, like the red-brick museum that my grandmother distrusted. Only in my museum nothing was dead. It was filled with a kind of patient, unwinking persistence—the persistence of a half-bewitched league of jack-o'-lantern faces waiting for me to come and sit with them in the green light high in the loft.

In the end I deserted them. There was no help for it. We moved away in what, to my mother, was a small triumph. I had no luggage of my own and no place to conceal the heads.

I can still remember that white, frosty morning and the cold clatter of hoofs as the cab rolled on its way toward the station. Away over the edge of the trees I could see the broken wind vane on Hagerty's stable, pointing steadily, as it always did, in one direction, no wind ever turning it. The heads were there. They would be there till the building fell.

"We will never come back here, son. Never." My mother's voice rang harshly over the cobblestones. But all the time I could feel the magnetic pull of those heads in Hagerty's stable. They would be there in the gray light and the green light; they would be there till the building fell.

III

Fainter than spider silk to my nearsighted gaze, the map lines run under the magnifying glass across a tumbled expanse of southwestern desert and lava beds. Names like Big Hatchet and Buckhorn still bring that vast and ominous landscape into my mind. Though the white man has taken it, it will never be rid of the ghosts of its last owners—the Apaches. It is their bones that lie in the cold on nameless peaks and in the red clay of the washes. Cochise, Victorio, Nana, and Geronimo will haunt it always. In the seventies of the last century many men died here. Dozens of others, the historians say, were never accounted for—the desert swallowed them up. Old Mr. Harney knew; he had been one of the missing. But it was from his family that I first got a hint of his story.

“He keeps her in the china closet,” one of them told me, “right with the dishes.”

“Kinfolk,” sniffed another, with a gesture of distaste.

“The skull of Aunt Lucinda,” explained a grandson with less heat. “He never buried her.”

“Oh?” I said, puzzled and tactful, while the relatives all chattered together. They would have to make it clear. I had come at their invitation.

“He liked meeting you,” they finally got out in chorus. “We think maybe you could influence him.”

“Influence?” I said.

“The skull,” they countered. “He won’t bury it. But he’s curious about your work. Maybe you could persuade him to give it to you. He’s restless about it. Old, you know, quite old. We don’t like having her there. It isn’t right. Nor proper. People say—” They tapped their heads in unison like little marionettes.

“It was barbed wire,” Mr. Harney said, “it was barbed wire finished our world.” He was eighty years old, and the skull lay on the table before us. We sat silent, gazing out into the clear white desert sunlight. Eighty years, I thought, and reached out and turned the skull gently over. Years of smoking pistols and Apaches riding fast through the narrow canyons.

“You have lived a long life,” I said. He sighed then, and

began talking—the merest wisp of a sound. I leaned forward to catch it.

“Six years in that valley after the haul from Texas, and me a youngster of ten. Mother dead on the trail. Her younger sister, Aunt Lucinda, raised me—the old man meanin’ well but ridin’—ridin’ most of the time. It took plenty ridin’ to hold things together without the wire.

“Sure, we knew there was Apaches in the hills, always was. But people had a way of stickin’. A way—” he paused and reached out as if to touch the nearest blue hill—“as though they liked somethin’ here—the air, maybe, so clear, or all this land at sunset, or maybe the feel of it, no fence from Texas to the Big Horns. Or maybe, like me, you had just followed along ’cause your people was moving and they was your people and you didn’t go askin’ ’em why their names changed along those little roads from the East.

“Lucinda was young and pretty with hair like the sheen on a blackbird’s feather, and as good to me as my own mother. Young enough to play and imagine things the way a kid will. When my father was gone she used to play in the yard with me. Aaahh”—the old man got out something between a sigh and a groan—“it didn’t last long.

“One night Pa didn’t come home. Nobody knows what that means any more. They can’t. The miles of darkness creeping in, and a woman and a kid sittin’ in a shack waitin’ for a man that ain’t comin’ back no more. You sit there and you dassent light the light for fear of drawin’ ’em. And all the time you know they know about you, and it’s no good, they’ll take their time.

“They got us in the morning, in the first light, with Lucinda standin’ out there lookin’ for Pa. One of ’em just picked her off out of the mesquite. I’m old, but I’ve never got it out of my head, so that sometimes I see it like now, with people and things of years later all shadows, and just me with my hand at my mouth, and that shot. She stood there a minute all young and pretty with her hands stretched out to me. And all that love flowed up in her a minute and held her as if she wouldn’t fall, and I ran toward her not thinkin’ of anything except, as a kid will, that in the circle of such love I must be safe.

“And then she gave a little sigh and that light went out of

her and she pitched face down into a clump of prickly pear. They took me then, squalling and kicking, and put me on a horse. After that I was an Apache till I was fifteen."

The faded old eyes turned slowly over the whole compass of the horizon as though they remembered every peak and gully. He didn't offer to go on.

"Mr. Harney," I chided.

"Mexico," he said. "We rode into Old Mexico. They was Victorio's men. And I learned to be an Apache. Kids learn quick. That's why I lived. Ride, shoot, steal. Live on nothing. Trust nobody, and keep ridin'—keep ridin'. South of the border, north of the border, it was all the same.

"Apaches! Y'know, son, that's a joker. We wasn't Apaches. We was a way of life. We lived so hard that half the kids in camp was stolen. Most of 'em Mexicans, stolen south of the border. Raised Apaches. It was the only way to keep our strength up.

"Maybe I was a little old. Maybe I remembered too much. Anyhow I used to see Victorio watching me." Again he paused, searching his memories. "You know, in the end I didn't hate them. I was beginning to look at it the way they did, and to nurse the same feelings. I'd been shot at a lot and seen Indian families and kids I knew disappear. In the end I would have stayed with them, I guess. I spoke the language by then. I could get along." He stopped and whispered to himself a moment in syllables that were not English. Then he went on.

"Victorio must have thought different. Either that or he'd taken a shine to me—I never knew. He was a great warrior and Geronimo was nothing compared to him. He was hard, but there was a kind of bigness in him. When I was fifteen we were sitting on our horses one day looking down into a little town from the hills. I could see people in the streets, and smoke in chimneys. We watched it like animals must watch people—curious and sharp and wild. I watched like everyone else, ready to vanish at the least sign of danger.

"The next thing I knew, Victorio had edged his horse up beside me. 'Those are your people,' he said soft and low and searching my face with his eyes. 'Do you remember?'

"And I looked at him and was afraid, and suddenly the face

of Lucinda came to me and I looked back at him, speaking Apache, and I said, 'Yes, I remember.'

"And he nodded, a little sad, and said, 'They are your people. Go down to them.' Then he spoke a word behind me and the thirty people of his band were gone.

"I don't know how—" I said. 'My people,' I said, and stopped. It came to me that all the people I had were Apache, and that I was Apache, too.

"Not a muscle of Victorio's face moved. 'Those are your people,' he said, pointing. 'We killed your father and the black-haired one. The white men will take care of you. You are not one of us.' With that he whirled his horse. I never saw him again.

"After a little while I picked my way down and spoke some words of English. It was slow work, like an old hinge squeaking in the wind. People came up to me and stared at my rags and at the pony."

Harney paused, considering, then he said flatly, "It wasn't so uncommon then—changing sides like that. There was room for two lives, and sometimes you had no choice. I got to be a white man even if I was a little late catchin' up. It was really about the same life: ride, shoot, kill. No difference, really, none to amount to anything. Not then, anyhow."

His eyes came almost shut against the midday heat shimmer that was beginning to roil the air out on the flats. I was afraid he was beginning to lose interest and go to sleep. I pushed the skull toward him. "The skull, Mr. Harney," I prodded. "You promised to tell me about the skull. It's a nice thing. Well cared for, too. A woman, I take it. Young. You can tell by the basilar suture. See?"

His eyes opened a little way, defensively, I thought.

"Aahh," he said again in that voice I was beginning to learn meant something hurt him. "It was afterward, sometime, that the thought came to me. I rode back to the old place. Nobody had been there all those years. And I found her—a few little bits of white bone, that is, and the skull in a drift of sand with the prickly pear grown over it. The hair," and with this he put up a careful, stroking finger, "was all gone. You wouldn't think it would go away so fast. For a while I looked around.

"Then it came on me I should bury her—and she out in the heat and dust and among bone-cracking coyotes so long. But what was there to bury, really? And besides this is a big wide land where you see miles as long as you can see at all. Every day of your life you see that way. And it's hard to be underground afterward. I had lived on the land enough to know.

"In the end I knew I couldn't bury her there. She was the only kin I had, so I took her up carefully and rode back with her. I figured at first maybe I'd have it done in a proper ceremony with a churchyard and a preacher to ease it a little.

"But then I couldn't. I couldn't face up to it. I kept putting it off and getting that feeling that if I did bury her she would go away; that she wouldn't be real any longer. I settled on this place finally and I kept Lucinda safe in the china closet. She never had to be afraid any more, and she could look out through the glass. Sometimes I talked to her.

"I'm a grown man, but that I did not get over, do you see—though I know all's dark in the grave and this is cold bone on the table top. I have a wife and sons, but this I will not bear—that they should put her under the ground with me."

He reached out and clutched my wrist and I cursed my easy juggling with anatomy a moment before. One of the family made a sign to me from the doorway.

I stood up then and took his hand and said quickly, by way of comfort, "She will not want to look through the glass at strange faces. Let her go with you. One can stay too long in the sun."

"Aahh," he said blindly, and took her back into his hands, fumbling. "It's plain you are not one of the open people, or you would not say that. It's the wire," he said, his voice subsiding once more to a thin whisper that seemed to come out of the grass beside us. "It's the wire that's made a difference. No wire from Texas to the Big Horns. It was all space and bright sun."

A granddaughter led him away.

IV

I wouldn't have taken old Mr. Harney's skull, even if he had offered it to me, for anything in the world. He had assumed a

personal responsibility there that was not transferable. I knew too much of the story, and yet I was not part of it. Young Aunt Lucinda would have haunted me. Not physically, perhaps, but with that kind of intangible loneliness that comes of knowing about events behind you in time that you can never alter or intrude within, and yet there is somebody there you know or love, or wish greatly to have comforted, but it is back behind you and of all things the loneliest. So I left Harney with that burden as all men are left with it. It was his time, and he would have to deal with it as best he could.

Now, years later, I have some intimation of the emotions that had shaken him. I get out all the skulls. A massive unknown cranium which bears the look of the Cro-Magnon past about it is one I rescued from a medical dissecting room. I touch with fondness a mineralized skull vault whose age I can never prove but that rolled, I well know, for ages in the glacial gravels of the Platte. I look at them all, these silent masks whose teeth I have mended and whose mortal rags I have patched together with preservatives. Where will they go after the years of comfort—these fading, anonymous individuals who have somehow come to have a claim upon me? Scientifically they are worthless, for museums scrutinize with ever greater care the credentials of the bones that are donated to their skull rooms.

What chance has a dissecting room specimen without a pedigree? Should I hide him as Tobias did, in the attic, and hope for a kinder time? Should I seek to protect him by surreptitiously introducing him into a cemetery vault? Well, you see the problem.

And it is a burden, too. I realize it more as I get older, and I know, now, why Tobias the lawyer left that unrecorded legacy in his attic. What else could he do? Most people don't look at these things in the same way, and it's just as well they don't. Otherwise we would be like certain Indian tribes who had to move the cemetery with them when they migrated. The attitude is easier to catch than you think. I know two men who have moved dead wives.

Generally I can't refuse skulls that are offered to me. It is not that I am morbid, or a true collector, or that I need many of them in my work. It is just that in most cases, people being

what they are, I know the skulls are safer with me. Call it a kind of respect for the bones, ingrained through long habit. That, I guess, is the reason I keep those two locked in the filing cabinet—they are delicate, and not in a position to defend themselves. So I look out for them. I'd do as much for you.