



The SPECTER *at the* FEAST

*The dead art student willed to his classmates
a souvenir far, far more potent
than his memory*

By STEPHEN ANDREWS

As told to ELLA BLANCHE KELLY

“**A**LAS, poor Yorick. I knew him well,” quoted Bob Sanderson, as we stood with a group of fellow students gazing at the grinning ghastly thing of bones. It had arrived at the studio that morning and was already mounted in its corner terribly still, it stood, and with an air of serene dignity. But it might have shrieked through its clenched teeth, so compelling was its presence.

I sought the eyes desperately as a man does when he is shaken and needs assurance or understanding. Empty sockets! Unbelievable that inert cavities could hold such an expression of sardonic misery! I cringed before them. Eyes that were more hideous for not being there at all!

And there was that incongruous, eternal grin that seemed to say: “Look at me. Once I was like you, fellows. Once I could join in your merry

banter and gossip o’ mornings. I, too, stood working before a clay figure, pressing, molding, making beauty with my hands. Poor mortal hands that found courage to fashion imperishable things, when they themselves must come to this decay. Andrews, my pal and confidant, why do you stare at them so? Why don’t you clasp them as you used to in your morning greeting?”

I stepped forward under the spell of an anguished memory to grasp those fearful, bony joints and recoiled, chilled with horror.

“But why?” The relentless grin seemed to say when I looked up again. “They used to warm your heart and set your day right.

Yours, too, will be like this, some day——”

Involuntarily, I looked at my own hands and shuddered.

“Andy!” A voice startled me, soft-spoken as

it had been, and I turned to Bob, who had called me. He, too, had stood staring a long moment, after quoting the Melancholy Dane, and as I looked into his darkened eyes under the familiar scowl, I knew he had meant no derision.

“Come away, old fellow,” he said. “This—this thing is getting us. Mustn’t be maudlin, but damned if I want any work and its consequent study of anatomy to make me as cold-blooded as some of the fellows here.

“Did you hear them jesting’ and making clever, derisive quips about life, inspired by that poor thing? Damn it, Andy, I knew that men of science, doctors, sculptors and the rest, get so familiar with our mortal machines that they have no illusions about the so-called souls that go with them. Atheists in their hearts, to the last man! It’s not for me to say whether that’s a blind spot from too much looking; but until they’re able to give me better proof of where consciousness goes when it leaves the body even temporarily, I’ll be on the fence—with a periscope.”

“**E**VEN if I felt as sure as they do that this is all that’s left of poor Novello,” I rejoined, “wouldn’t that be all the more reason for respecting the one thing about him that does live—our memories?”

“False courage, Andy,” Bob came back at me. “That remnant there is our common destiny, and since its irrevocable it isn’t pretty to think about. Bitterness, even clever bitterness, in the face of that, is only the frenzied bewilderment of half-cowards before an unconquerable foe. The desperate kitten spitting at a police dog. Courage? Of a kind, yes; but it only makes you laugh, doesn’t it? I’m not especially courageous, Andy, but I’m a stingy cuss, and I hate to give my reaper a laugh,” he ended.

Novello, a promising young Italian student had worked, chatted, laughed and smoked with us but a few months ago, and now this was all—

We had liked and admired him for his genial nature and his unmistakable talent, but mostly for his courage. Unlike the majority of us who had good homes and some means, Novello had had no close relatives, had lived alone and slaved doggedly at most anything between school hours to eke out a living and continue the work he loved. With half the chances for happiness, and

twice the discouragements that we had, he had never been in an ugly mood. A thoroughly likeable fellow.

Pretty little Patricia Herron, youngest daughter of old Colonel Herron, the most popular girl in the class, had singled him out when she could have had any of us. But we had been glad anyhow; at least, Bob and I knew he was in love with her—in a hopeless sort of way.

He rarely came to any of our parties. He had to work and couldn’t afford to. So Pat usually came with Harlan Ware, who had pursued her clownishly in spite of her aloofness ever since she had entered the class.

However, on one occasion Novello had joined us late and unexpectedly, to find Pat draped in a velvet portiere and a silk lamp-shade set rakishly on her bobbed head, preparing with a couple of masculine confederates wearing impromptu whiskers and protruding with pillows, to burlesque a scene from a current revival of a popular operetta. He had seated himself at the piano without stopping to remove his coat and played from memory the opening and accompanying score. Then, when Pat was wrestling vocally with her bewiskered abductors, he had surprised us all by picking up the cue of the banished lover and coming to her rescue with mock gallantry and a rich baritone voice. After much laughter and loud applause, the rest had amused themselves with other things, but Pat and Novello had gone back to the piano together. They sat, singing softly to themselves the strains of half forgotten melodies, until Harlan with ill-concealed bad humor came to claim Pat for a dance and then took her home.

During the following weeks, Pat and Novello lunched frequently together and Harlan consoled himself with mutterings about “Wops.”

Four months later, Novello had been taken seriously ill and had been told he required an immediate operation. Knowing of his perilous condition, and that he hadn’t the necessary funds, Bob and I had called a class meeting and collected among us more than a sufficient sum to carry him through.

When I went to the hospital to tell him this, he protested at first and then in his quiet way he grasped my hand, tears came to his eyes and he turned his face to the wall.

Well—poor Novello never came through. Four of us fellows had spent the whole morning at the hospital. After the news came, we trudged slowly back to school without saying a word. He had been a real friend, and we felt his loss keenly.

The next day we learned that when Novello had known he was dying despite all that had been done for him, he had requested through his physician that his skeleton be given to the studio he had attended. He explained that he had once heard Professor Kalin say he desired the class to have one.

Whether he did this as a last act of gratitude, or whether he couldn't bear to leave the place he had loved, and felt that in this way he could be with us still, I don't know.

But—there it was. God, I was glad Pat wasn't present! She had been grieved, stunned by his death and had gone to Europe with her mother shortly afterwards. I decided to inform her of the strange bequest as soon as she returned, for I wanted to spare her coming back to the studio without knowing what would greet her there. It would be hard enough for her without such a shock.

BUT it is strange how intimacies and friendships are forgotten like dreams when they are no longer part of us. After a few months, the studio seemed quite the same, and most of the boys with the exception of Bob and myself could come into the room without a quick look to that corner and its ever-present reminder.

Pat stayed in Europe longer than we had expected, and it was almost a year after Novello's death that I heard from her at home. She phoned that she was driving in from Long Island where she lived, and would drop by school for me at luncheon time if I wanted her to. Of course, I would be delighted to see her, and then I remembered too, the thing I must tell her.

I was waiting for Pat at the door when she drove up. We lunched at a little tea room around the corner and Pat had six escorts instead of one. For the rest of the students coming out at lunch time had recognized her car and insisted on joining us. Pat seemed quite her merry self again. I wondered how I would warn her about the thing in the studio for I feared she might return there with us and get a bad shock.

On the way back, I insisted upon walking alone with Pat. Sympathetically as I had hoped to put it, I fear I was very blunt. Her eyes filled with tears, but she pressed my hand and said: "Thanks, Andy, a lot, I understand." As the rest of the group came up, she raised her head, smiled quickly and I don't think they could have noticed any difference in her manner. She chatted gaily at the door, but refused to come up to the studio, pleading that she had other engagements and must hurry away.

I WAS putting her in the roadster when Harlan Ware, who had just heard of Pat's return, came down. He rushed over to take her hands. At that moment, I felt sorry for him, for I knew he had missed Pat terribly. He pleaded to join her for a little spin, that they might talk, and they drove away together.

We saw Pat quite a lot during the next few weeks at luncheons and parties. But she never came back to the studio, although Harlan tried to persuade her several times, saying her refusal was "blamed nonsense."

It was the second week in June, and the class was already in a flutter of anticipation about the annual class banquet set for the last Thursday of the month. This event always caused considerable excitement among us, for it was held in the studio and only for class members. There was something about coming back to a familiar scene of toil in holiday attire and bent only on pleasure that lent an atmosphere to the evening.

Two days before the party, Harlan Ware announced that Pat had consented to attend with him. We were surprised at her final decision but we were enthusiastic about it, for we had missed her and we remembered what a big part she had been of the two previous annuals.

Well, the evening had finally arrived, after a lackadaisical day at school, during which little work had been done while we gathered in groups and chattered about the possibilities of the evening.

Most of the gang had come early and in high spirits. "Chubby" Collins had started off the evening with his three impersonations, rendered to shouts of laughter although the crowd had seen them many times. Pretty Maybelle Fenton was ensconced becomingly in the window seat,

strumming a uke, while four of the boys hovered over her, harmonizing extravagantly on moonlight melodies. There was little Sally Folsom, *a la* John Held, Jr., perched atop the piano, with a cigarette in one hand and a cocktail in the other. Clever little girl, Sally, but you had to watch her drinks.

Someone had suggested dancing, and after a few turns I had gone downstairs with a couple of the boys for a smoke. When I came back, I saw Bob making the rounds as though looking for someone, and I went over to join him.

"Haven't seen Pat and Harlan, have you?" he asked. I looked at my watch and was surprised to find it was almost eleven o'clock. And no sign of Harlan and Pat! We made inquiries from some of the rest, but no one had seen Harlan since school hours when he had promised to be there early and "with a pink ribbon in his hair." He had confided to a few of the boys that he meant to ask Pat a very important question that night and had gone home in a high mood.

THE dancing and hilarity had lulled for a while and capable Betty Lindsey was busying herself with seating arrangements at the table when Harlan walked in alone.

Two of the girls ran up, to ask excitedly what he had done with his charge. He replied shortly: "Pat had a headache. Didn't feel she should come." His voice was calm, but his face was flushed and I knew he was furiously angry at what he called Pat's "blamed nonsense." Angry and jealous—of a memory!

"Chubby" mixed him a drink, then commandeering Les Corbin for a steed, he rode up in state to deliver it. Harlan laughed at this and seemed to be regaining his composure, but he became sullen again at the table. I sat opposite him and noticed that he was punishing the wine steadily. He had already had enough to make him drop the mask of amused interest he had worn earlier at supper, and he no longer laughed at the clever things little Sally Folsom on his left cooed in his ear. He was scowling fiercely in the direction of the corner. I realized this with a shock. I don't think anyone else had noticed it, for there was much gaiety and laughter about the table.

Then suddenly he rose, strode over to the corner, took the poor thing of bones down, carried

it back and say it in a chair at the head of the table. It was all done so quickly that some of the crowd had not seen it until it was seated there. Three of the girls shrieked and ran from the table. It did look grotesque—this grinning, ghastly thing at the head of a banquet table, with a bony hand at either side of its plate.

I pushed back my chair and stared at Harlan, wondering if he had suddenly gone mad, There was a diabolical expression of vengeance and jealousy in his bloodshot eyes and his mouth was twisted cruelly. He was pouring drinks for those nearest him, for himself, and for the thing of bones! With a gesture, he raised his glass to the stark jaws, and adding to the already incredibly gruesome scene, he began in a voice that seemed to choke and rattle deep down in his throat:

"Look at him, fellows! My lucky rival! Drink, drink to him, boys! He wins—with a heart turned to dust! Damn you, Novello! I tried to bring her here tonight—to show her how you've changed. You haven't, to her—that's the way with women—they shut their eyes to see! Damn your grinning pack of bones! Why don't you laugh? Laugh aloud! You've beaten me, haven't you? You win! You win, damn you! Here's—here's—to you!" He finished brokenly, as he picked up the wine he had poured for the thing and flung it through the grinning teeth. Then with one movement he gulped his own drink and fell back sobbing in his chair, his head in his arms on the table.

Then "Chubby" strolled back into the studio and slammed the door.

I got up to follow him, but Harlan stopped me at the door. "Stay with me, won't you, Andrews?" He shuddered, He was sitting on the edge of the couch, digging his fingers through his hair. He did look done-up, poor devil.

"All right," I replied. "Turn in. I'll be with you in a minute."

I stepped into the studio, but everybody had gone—even "Chubby," with whom I had wanted to have a few words. How deserted the place looked! I certainly wasn't going to linger long here. I lighted a cigarette and sat down at the far end of the room, with my back to the table for a few quick puffs.

When I had finished smoking-, I walked over to the wall switch near the door to turn out

the lights. Might as well leave things as they were until morning, I thought. I'll go to bed now.

I turned the switch, the lights went out and my heart almost stopped beating! Good God, what was that fluttering, reddish glow behind me, over my shoulder! I was paralyzed for the moment and afraid to turn around, for I remembered too well the thing sitting at the table. Suppose those tales one heard were true? Suppose poor Novello's spirit—Well, I couldn't stand here all night. Slowly, half leaning against the door, I turned to look. Boy, what a relief! With a sigh and a little chuckle, I relaxed against the door. A good laugh for the fellows tomorrow. What an old woman I was getting to be. Afraid of my own shadow—might as well be that way, as to be afraid of the glow of a few almost burned-out candles sputtering in a dark room. The candles on the table, of course. I'd forgotten all about them.

I opened my eyes and looked again. I stared—for I was fascinated by the gruesome beauty of that fantastic scene. The flicker of almost exhausted candles casting an eerie, wavering light on the deserted banquet table in the great dark studio—the only remaining guest, that thing of bones at the head of the table. That grinning, ghastly thing with its unearthly expression of misery and mockery. Little lights and shadows that chased themselves across the hideous face and almost made it seem animated—

Maybe I was going mad, standing here staring so long at that thing—I made an effort to pull myself together, walked quickly to the table, extinguished the candles and went in to rejoin Harlan,

WHEN I awakened the next morning, Harlan was already dressed and reclining in an easy chair. His eyes were closed wearily, as though he had not yet had enough sleep.

"Morning, Ware," I called. "How's the head?"

"Glad you're awake, Andrews," he replied. "I am bad company for myself this morning, On top of knowing that I made a damned ass of myself last night, I've had a most horrible nightmare that hangs on like a leech. Can't seem to shake it off, even now when I'm wide awake. Serves me right, of course, after what I did last night. What do you suppose possessed me, Andy?"

Can't excuse myself on so few drinks. And that hellish dream! Got to tell it to you, Andrews, even though it's silly as the deuce; then maybe I can forget it."

He glanced up shamefacedly to see if I was listening as he continued: "The whole thing started out of a great glare of light that almost blinded me at first and which I realized afterwards was the headlights of a car. A speeding car, coming toward me, which for no reason filled me with great glee. Then I became conscious that it was Pat's car, and there was Pat speeding toward me—toward all of us, as fast as she could. She was coming to the party, of course. As I ran down the long, dark road to meet her, waving my arms and shouting greetings, I saw something white in the seat beside her. Then, as the car drew nearer, it became—that thing in there!" He nodded toward the studio, as he covered his eyes.

"Then I could see Pat's face, and it was no longer smiling as she grappled desperately with the thing that had its long, bony hands on the steering wheel and was turning it against Pat's strength toward the steep, dark embankment at one side of the road. Terror-stricken, I tried to run to help her, but I couldn't move an inch! You can't imagine the horror that gripped me as I stood there in, the dark road, unable to move, while that thing battled with Pat over the wheel, swerving the speeding car dangerously from side to side of the road, getting nearer and nearer the embankment until, with a great crash of broken glass and a shriek from Pat, they plunged over into the darkness below. Then I woke up.

WE had been so stunned by this horrible finale to our dinner that I don't think anyone moved until Sally Folsom's hysterical giggle broke the spell. There followed a few moments of excited discussion, mostly in monotones, while some of the boys admonished Harlan to "buck up," while others winked and talked about "his having had too much." The girls had gone for their wraps, since now it seemed impossible to resume frivolities.

There was a small but comfortable ante-room off the studio that Professor Kalin had allowed the boys to fit up for use during the winter months, and we had often taken turns at spending the night there when we wanted to work

late or get an early morning start on some particularly interesting subject. It had been good-natured “Chubby” Collins’ for that weekend, but he took Harlan there and offered it to him in embarrassed sympathy;

“Go to bed, you sap, and get some shut-eye. That’s what you need. I gotta take Betty home.”

“Terrible, wasn’t it? Gave me such a nasty twist, I can’t get it out of my mind. Well, it’s only seven o’clock, Andy,” he concluded. “Shall we go out for a little cool morning air, before we have breakfast and brighten up the place?”

We were about ready to leave when Bob came in.

“How do you happen to be up so early?” he asked. “Have you heard, too?”

“Heard what?” I asked quickly.

“**A**BOUT Pat,” he answered, and I saw Harlan start and clench his teeth, “they found her at the bottom of that embankment near Merrick’s corner this morning in her wrecked car—dead! Her mother called me about a half an hour before they found her. She asked if I knew where she had gone for the night. She said Pat had decided suddenly around eleven o’clock last night that she had behaved foolishly about refusing to go to the party and had climbed into her roadster, chuckling over the surprise she would give us when she walked in time for the banquet. Her mother seemed to have a premonition of what would happen for she said it had been drizzling when Pat left and she had cautioned her against driving too fast on the slippery road. I—I hadn’t the heart to tell her we hadn’t seen Pat. I was afraid, too, so I dressed and went out—but they had discovered her body. Poor little Pat,” he finished with a sigh.

Harlan had slumped into a chair and sat staring into space. I motioned Bob to follow me into the studio, and without a word we took the thing of bones and replaced it in its corner. As we turned away, I noticed a strand of hair caught in the bony fingers of the left hand!

“Probably Sally’s—last night,” Bob said, “She was nearest, wasn’t she?” I didn’t answer but I felt cold all over as I walked away.

I have never told anyone of the dream Harlan so vividly related to me that morning. I’d merely be thought an impressionable fool if I did, I guess.

To the rest of the world, Pat was just a member of the reckless younger generation, speeding in typical fashion on a slippery night road to join a party of waiting friends and ending disastrously at the bottom of a cliff. Too bad, but quite a natural denouement these days!

Call me superstitious if you will, but I can’t think of the affair without having grave doubts as to its natural conclusion.

If spirits do live on, in that vague place we call the Borderland, retaining their earthly personalities, then they must indeed retain their earthly emotions as well.

Novello had loved Pat. Can death change that? Since Pat continued to love his memory, was he not, as Harlan had said, still the lucky rival?

But he was a rival unable to defend his mortal memory from the blasphemous and unsportsmanlike treatment to which it had been subjected! Suppose this fact had taunted him into contemplating an interrupted victory—into taking Pat across the misty frontier that had intercepted their love?

Who knows?