

The Room of the Evil Thought

By Elia W. Peattie

They called it the room of the Evil Thought. It was really the pleasantest room in the house, and when the place had been used as the rectory, was the minister's study. It looked out on a mournful clump of larches, such as may often be seen in the old-fashioned yards in Michigan, and these threw a tender gloom over the apartment.

There was a wide fireplace in the room, and it had been the young minister's habit to sit there hours and hours, staring ahead of him at the fire, and smoking moodily. The replenishing of the fire and of his pipe, it was said, would afford him occupation all the day long, and that was how it came about that his parochial duties were neglected so that, little by little, the people became dissatisfied with him, though he was an eloquent young man, who could send his congregation away drunk on his influence. However, the calmer pulsed among his parish began to whisper that it was indeed the influence of the young minister and not that of the Holy Ghost which they felt, and it was finally decided that neither animal magnetism nor hypnotism were good substitutes for religion. And so they let him go.

The new rector moved into a smart brick house on the other side of the church, and gave receptions and dinner parties, and was punctilious about making his calls. The people therefore liked him very much -- so much that they raised the debt on the church and bought a chime of bells, in their enthusiasm. Every one was lighter of heart than under the ministration of the previous rector. A burden appeared to be lifted from the community. True, there were a few who confessed the new man did not give them the food for thought which the old one had done, but, then, the former rector had made them uncomfortable! He had not only made them conscious of the sins of which they were already guilty, but also of those for which they had the latent capacity. A strange and fatal man, whom women loved to their sorrow, and whom simple men could not understand! It was generally agreed that the parish was well rid of him.

"He was a genius," said the people in commiseration. The word was an uncomplimentary epithet with them.

When the Hanscoms moved in the house which had been the old rectory, they gave Grandma Hanscom the room with the fireplace. Grandma was well pleased. The roaring fire warmed her heart as well as her chill old body, and she wept with weak joy when she looked at the larches, because they reminded her of the house she had lived in when she was first married. All the forenoon of the first day she was busy putting things away in bureau drawers and closets, but by afternoon she was ready to sit down in her high-backed rocker and enjoy the comforts of her room.

She nodded a bit before the fire, as she usually did after luncheon, and then she awoke with an awful start and sat staring before her with such a look in her gentle, filmy old eyes as had never been there before. She did not move, except to rock slightly, and the Thought grew and grew till her face was disguised as by some hideous mask of tragedy.

By and by the children came pounding at the door.

"Oh, grandma, let us in, please. We want to see your new room, and mamma gave us some ginger cookies on a plate, and we want to give some to you."

The door gave way under their assaults, and the three little ones stood peeping in, waiting for permission to enter. But it did not seem to be their grandma -- their own dear grandma -- who arose and tottered toward them in fierce haste, crying:

“Away, away! Out of my sight! Out of my sight before I do the thing I want to do! Such a terrible thing! Send some one to me quick, children, children! Send some one quick!”

They fled with feet shod with fear, and their mother came, and Grandma Hanscom sank down and clung about her skirts and sobbed:

“Tie me, Miranda. Make me fast to the bed or the wall. Get some one to watch me. For I want to do an awful thing!”

They put the trembling old creature in bed, and she raved there all the night long and cried out to be held, and to be kept from doing the fearful thing, whatever it was -- for she never said what it was.

The next morning some one suggested taking her in the sitting-room where she would be with the family. So they laid her on the sofa, hemmed around with cushions, and before long she was her quiet self again, though exhausted, naturally, with the tumult of the previous night. Now and then, as the children played about her, a shadow crept over her face -- a shadow as of cold remembrance -- and then the perplexed tears followed.

When she seemed as well as ever they put her back in her room. But though the fire glowed and the lamp burned, as soon as ever she was alone they heard her shrill cries ringing to them that the Evil Thought had come again. So Hal, who was home from college, carried her up to his room, which she seemed to like very well. Then he went down to have a smoke before grandma’s fire.

The next morning he was absent from breakfast. They thought he might have gone for an early walk, and waited for him a few minutes. Then his sister went to the room that looked upon the larches, and found him dressed and pacing the floor with a face set and stern. He had not been in bed at all, as she saw at once. His eyes were bloodshot, his face stricken as if with old age or sin or -- but she could not make it out. When he saw her he sank in a chair and covered his face with his hands, and between the trembling fingers she could see drops of perspiration on his forehead.

“Hal!” she cried, “Hal, what is it?”

But for answer he threw his arms about the little table and clung to it, and looked at her with tortured eyes, in which she fancied she saw a gleam of hate. She ran, screaming, from the room, and her father came and went up to him and laid his hands on the boy’s shoulders. And then a fearful thing happened. All the family saw it. There could be no mistake. Hal’s hands found their way with frantic eagerness toward his father’s throat as if they would choke him, and the look in his eyes was so like a madman’s that his father raised his fist and felled him as he used to fell men years before in the college fights, and then dragged him into the sittingroom and wept over him.

By evening, however, Hal was all right, and the family said it must have been a fever, -- perhaps from overstudy, -- at which Hal covertly smiled. But his father was still too anxious about him to let him out of his sight, so he put him on a cot in his room, and thus it chanced that the mother and Grace concluded to sleep together downstairs.

The two women made a sort of festival of it, and drank little cups of chocolate before the fire, and undid and brushed their brown braids, and smiled at each other, understandingly, with that sweet intuitive sympathy which women have, and Grace told her mother a number of things which she had been waiting for just such an auspicious occasion to confide.

But the larches were noisy and cried out with wild voices, and the flame of the fire grew blue and swirled about in the draught sinuously, so that a chill crept upon the two. Something cold appeared to envelop them -- such a chill as pleasure voyagers feel when a berg steals beyond Newfoundland and glows blue and threatening upon their ocean path.

Then came something else which was not cold, but hot as the flames of hell -- and they saw red, and stared at each other with maddened eyes, and then ran together from the room and clasped in close embrace safe beyond the fatal place, and thanked God they had not done the thing that they dared not speak of -- the thing which suddenly came to them to do.

So they called it the room of the Evil Thought. They could not account for it. They avoided the thought of it, being healthy and happy folk. But none entered it more. The door was locked.

One day, Hal, reading the paper, came across a paragraph concerning the young minister who had once lived there, and who had thought and written there and so influenced the lives of those about him that they remembered him even while they disapproved.

“He cut a man’s throat on board ship for Australia,” said he, “and then he cut his own, without fatal effect -- and jumped overboard, and so ended it. What a strange thing!”

Then they all looked at one another with subtle looks, and a shadow fell upon them and stayed the blood at their hearts.

The next week the room of the Evil Thought was pulled down to make way for a pansy bed, which is quite gay and innocent, and blooms all the better because the larches, with their eternal murmuring, have been laid low and carted away to the sawmill.