

The End of All Living

A short story by Alice Brown

The First Church of Tiverton stands on a hill, whence it overlooks the little village, with one or two pine-shaded neighborhoods beyond, and, when the air is clear, a thin blue line of upland delusively like the sea. Set thus austere aloft, it seems now a survival of the day when men used to go to meeting gun in hand, and when one stayed, a lookout by the door, to watch and listen. But this the present dwellers do not remember.

Conceding not a sigh to the holy and strenuous past, they lament--and the more as they grow older--the stiff climb up the hill, albeit to rest in so sweet a sanctuary at the top. For it is sweet indeed. A soft little wind seems always to be stirring there, on summer Sundays a messenger of good. It runs whispering about, and wafts in all sorts of odors: honey of the milkweed and wild rose, and a Christmas tang of the evergreens just below. It carries away something, too--scents calculated to bewilder the thrift-hunting bee: sometimes a whiff of peppermint from an old lady's pew, but oftener the breath of musk and southernwood, gathered in ancient gardens, and borne up here to embroider the preacher's drowsy homilies, and remind us, when we faint, of the keen savor of righteousness.

Here in the church do we congregate from week to week; but behind it, on a sloping hillside, is the last home of us all, the old burying-ground, overrun with a briery tangle, and relieved by Nature's sweet and cunning hand from the severe decorum set ordinarily about the dead. Our very faithlessness has made it fair. There was a time when we were a little ashamed of it. We regarded it with affection, indeed, but affection of the sort accorded some rusty relative who has lain too supine in the rut of years. Thus, with growing ambition came, in due course, the project of a new burying-ground. This we dignified, even in common speech; it was always grandly "the Cemetery." While it lay unrealized in the distance, the home of our forbears fell into neglect, and Nature marched in, according to her lavishness, and adorned what we ignored. The white alder crept farther and farther from its bounds; tansy and wild rose rioted in profusion, and soft patches of violets smiled to meet the spring. Here were, indeed, great riches, "a little of everything" that pasture life

affords: a hardy bed of checkerberry, crimson strawberries nodding on long stalks, and in one sequestered corner the beloved Linnaea. It seemed a consecrated pasture shut off from daily use, and so given up to pleasantness that you could scarcely walk there without setting foot on some precious outgrowth of the spring, or pushing aside a summer loveliness better made for wear.

Ambition had its fulfillment. We bought our Cemetery, a large, green tract, quite square, and lying open to the sun. But our pendulum had swung too wide. Like many folk who suffer from one discomfort, we had gone to the utmost extreme and courted another. We were tired of climbing hills, and so we pressed too far into the lowland; and the first grave dug in our Cemetery showed three inches of water at the bottom. It was in "Prince's new lot," and there his young daughter was to lie. But her lover had stood by while the men were making the grave; and, looking into the ooze below, he woke to the thought of her fair young body there.

"God!" they heard him say, "she sha'n't lay so. Leave it as it is, an' come up into the old buryin'-ground. There's room enough by me."

The men, all mates of his, stopped work without a glance and followed him; and up there in the dearer shrine her place was made. The father said but a word at her changed estate. Neighbors had hurried in to bring him the news; he went first to the unfinished grave in the Cemetery, and then strode up the hill, where the men had not yet done. After watching them for a while in silence, he turned aside; but he came back to drop a trembling hand upon the lover's arm.

"I guess," he said miserably, "she'd full as lieves lay here by you."

And she will be quite beside him, though, in the beaten ways of earth, others have come between. For years he lived silently and apart; but when his mother died, and he and his father were left staring at the dulled embers of life, he married a good woman, who perhaps does not deify early dreams; yet she is tender of them, and at the death of her own child it was she who went toiling up to the graveyard, to see that its little place did not encroach too far. She gave no reason, but we all knew

it was because she meant to let her husband lie there by the long-loved guest.

Naturally enough, after this incident of the forsaken grave, we conceived a strange horror of the new Cemetery, and it has remained deserted to this day. It is nothing but a meadow now, with that one little grassy hollow in it to tell a piteous tale. It is mown by any farmer who chooses to take it for a price; but we regard it differently from any other plot of ground. It is "the Cemetery," and always will be. We wonder who has bought the grass. "Eli's got the Cemetery this year," we say. And sometimes awe-stricken little squads of school children lead one another there, hand in hand, to look at the grave where Annie Prince was going to be buried when her beau took her away. They never seem to connect that heart-broken wraith of a lover with the bent farmer who goes to and fro driving the cows. He wears patched overalls, and has sciatica in winter; but I have seen the gleam of youth awakened, though remotely, in his eyes. I do not believe he ever quite forgets; there are moments, now and then, at dusk or midnight, all his for poring over those dulled pages of the past.

After we had elected to abide by our old home, we voted an enlargement of its bounds; and thereby hangs a tale of outlawed revenge. Long years ago "old Abe Eaton" quarreled with his twin brother, and vowed, as the last fiat of an eternal divorce, "I won't be buried in the same yard with ye!"

The brother died first; and because he lay within a little knoll beside the fence, Abe willfully set a public seal on that iron oath by purchasing a strip of land outside, wherein he should himself be buried. Thus they would rest in a hollow correspondence, the fence between. It all fell out as he ordained, for we in Tiverton are cheerfully willing to give the dead their way. Lax enough is the helpless hand in the fictitious stiffness of its grasp; and we are not the people to deny it holding, by courtesy at least. Soon enough does the sceptre of mortality crumble and fall. So Abe was buried according to his wish. But when necessity commanded us to add unto ourselves another acre, we took in his grave with it, and the fence, falling into decay, was never renewed. There he lies, in affectionate

decorum, beside the brother he hated; and thus does the greater good wipe out the individual wrong.

So now, as in ancient times, we toil steeply up here, with the dead upon his bier; for not often in Tiverton do we depend on that uncouth monstrosity, the hearse. It is not that we do not own one,--a rigid box of that name has belonged to us now for many a year; and when Sudleigh came out with a new one, plumes, trappings, and all, we broached the idea of emulating her. But the project fell through after Brad Freeman's contented remark that he guessed the old one would last us out. He "never heard no complaint from anybody 't ever rode in it." That placed our last journey on a homely, humorous basis, and we smiled, and reflected that we preferred going up the hill borne by friendly hands, with the light of heaven falling on our coffin-lids.

The antiquary would set much store by our headstones, did he ever find them out. Certain of them are very ancient, according to our ideas; for they came over from England, and are now fallen into the grayness of age. They are woven all over with lichens, and the blackberry binds them fast. Well, too, for them! They need the grace of some such veiling; for most of them are alive, even to this day, with warning skulls, and awful cherubs compounded of bleak, bald faces and sparsely feathered wings. One discovery, made there on a summer day, has not, I fancy, been duplicated in another New England town. On six of the larger tombstones are carved, below the grass level, a row of tiny imps, grinning faces and humanized animals. Whose was the hand that wrought? The Tivertonians know nothing about it. They say there was a certain old Veasey who, some eighty odd years ago, used to steal into the graveyard with his tools, and there, for love, scrape the mosses from the stones and chip the letters clear. He liked to draw, "creatur's" especially, and would trace them for children on their slates. He lived alone in a little house long since fallen, and he would eat no meat. That is all they know of him. I can guess but one thing more: that when no looker-on was by, he pushed away the grass, and wrote his little jokes, safe in the kindly tolerance of the dead. This was the identical soul who should, in good old days, have been carving gargoyles and misereres; here his only field was the obscurity of Tiverton churchyard, his only monument these grotesqueries so cunningly concealed.

We have epitaphs, too,--all our own as yet, for the world has not discovered them. One couple lies in well-to-do respectability under a tiny monument not much taller than the conventional gravestone, but shaped on a pretentious model.

"We'd ruther have it nice," said the builders, "even if there ain't much of it."

These were Eliza Marden and Peleg her husband, who worked from sun to sun, with scant reward save that of pride in their own fore-handedness. I can imagine them as they drove to church in the open wagon, a couple portentously large and prosperous: their one child, Hannah, sitting between them, and glancing about her, in a flickering, intermittent way, at the pleasant holiday world. Hannah was no worker; she liked a long afternoon in the sun, her thin little hands busied about nothing weightier than crochet; and her mother regarded her with a horrified patience, as one who might some time be trusted to sow all her wild oats of idleness. The well-mated pair died within the same year, and it was Hannah who composed their epitaph, with an artistic accuracy, but a defective sense of rhyme:--

"Here lies Eliza
She was a striver
Here lies Peleg
He was a select Man"

We townsfolk found something haunting and bewildering in the lines; they drew, and yet they baffled us, with their suggested echoes luring only to betray. Hannah never wrote anything else, but we always cherished the belief that she could do "most anything" with words and their possibilities. Still, we accepted her one crowning achievement, and never urged her to further proof. In Tiverton we never look genius in the mouth. Nor did Hannah herself propose developing her gift. Relieved from the spur of those two unquiet spirits who had begotten her, she settled down

to sit all day in the sun, learning new patterns of crochet; and having cheerfully let her farm run down, she died at last in a placid poverty.

Then there was Desire Baker, who belonged to the era of colonial hardship, and who, through a redundant punctuation, is relegated to a day still more remote. For some stone-cutter, scornful of working by the card, or born with an inordinate taste for periods, set forth, below her _obiit_, the astounding statement:--

"The first woman. She made the journey to Boston. By stage."

Here, too, are the ironies whereof departed life is prodigal. This is the tidy lot of Peter Merrick, who had a desire to stand well with the world, in leaving it, and whose purple and fine linen were embodied in the pomp of death. He was a cobbler, and he put his small savings together to erect a modest monument to his own memory. Every Sunday he visited it, "after meetin'," and perhaps his day-dreams, as he sat leather-aproned on his bench, were still of that white marble idealism. The inscription upon it was full of significant blanks; they seemed an interrogation of the destiny which governs man.

"Here lies Peter Merrick----" ran the unfinished scroll, "and his wife who died----"

But ambitious Peter never lay there at all; for in his later prime, with one flash of sharp desire to see the world, he went on a voyage to the Banks, and was drowned. And his wife? The story grows somewhat threadbare. She summoned his step-brother to settle the estate, and he, a marble-cutter by trade, filled in the date of Peter's death with letters English and illegible. In the process of their carving, the widow stood by, hands folded under her apron from the midsummer sun. The two got excellent well acquainted, and the stone-cutter prolonged his stay. He came again in a little over a year, at Thanksgiving time, and they were married. Which shows that nothing is certain in life,--no, not the proprieties of our leaving it,--and that even there we must walk softly, writing no boastful legend for time to annul.

At one period a certain quatrain had a great run in Tiverton; it was the epitaph of the day. Noting how it overspread that stony soil, you picture to yourself the modest pride of its composer; unless, indeed, it had been copied from an older inscription in an English yard, and transplanted through the heart and brain of some settler whose thoughts were ever flitting back. Thus it runs in decorous metre:--

"Dear husband, now my life is passed,
You have dearly loved me to the last.
Grieve not for me, but pity take
On my dear children for my sake."

But one sorrowing widower amended it, according to his wife's direction, so that it bore a new and significant meaning. He was charged to

"pity take
On my dear parent for my sake."

The lesson was patent. His mother-in-law had always lived with him, and she was "difficult." Who knows how keenly the sick woman's mind ran on the possibilities of reef and quicksand for the alien two left alone without her guiding hand? So she set the warning of her love and fear to be no more forgotten while she herself should be remembered.

The husband was a silent man. He said very little about his intentions; performance was enough for him. Therefore it happened that his "parent," adopted perforce, knew nothing about this public charge until she came upon it, on her first Sunday visit, surveying the new glory of the stone. The story goes that she stood before it, a square, portentous figure in black alpaca and warlike mitts, and that she uttered these irrevocable words:--

"Pity on _me_! Well, I guess he won't! I'll go to the poor-farm fust!"

And Monday morning, spite of his loyal dissuasions, she packed her "blue chist," and drove off to a far-away cousin, who got her "nussin'" to do. Another lesson from the warning finger of Death: let what was life not dream that it can sway the life that is, after the two part company.

Not always were mothers-in-law such breakers of the peace. There is a story in Tiverton of one man who went remorsefully mad after his wife's death, and whose mind dwelt unceasingly on the things he had denied her. These were not many, yet the sum seemed to him colossal. It piled the Ossa of his grief. Especially did he writhe under the remembrance of certain blue dishes she had desired the week before her sudden death; and one night, driven by an insane impulse to expiate his blindness, he walked to town, bought them, and placed them in a foolish order about her grave. It was a puerile, crazy deed, but no one smiled, not even the little children who heard of it next day, on the way home from school, and went trudging up there to see. To their stirring minds it seemed a strange departure from the comfortable order of things, chiefly because their elders stood about with furtive glances at one another and murmurs of "Poor creatur'!" But one man, wiser than the rest, "harnessed up," and went to tell the dead woman's mother, a mile away. Jonas was "shackled;" he might "do himself a mischief." In the late afternoon, the guest so summoned walked quietly into the silent house, where Jonas sat by the window, beating one hand incessantly upon the sill, and staring at the air. His sister, also, had come; she was frightened, however, and had betaken herself to the bedroom, to sob. But in walked this little plump, soft-footed woman, with her banded hair, her benevolent spectacles, and her atmosphere of calm.

"I guess I'll blaze a fire, Jonas," said she. "You step out an' git me a mite o' kindlin'."

The air of homely living enwrapped him once again, and mechanically, with the inertia of old habit, he obeyed. They had a "cup o' tea" together; and then, when the dishes were washed, and the peaceful twilight began to settle down upon them like a sifting mist, she drew a little rocking chair to the window where he sat opposite, and spoke.

"Jonas," said she, in that still voice which had been harmonized by the experiences of life, "arter dark, you jest go up an' bring home them blue dishes. Mary's got an awful lot o' fun in her, an' if she ain't laughin' over that, I'm beat. Now, Jonas, you do it! Do you s'pose she wants them nice blue pieces out there through wind an' weather? She'd ruther by half see 'em on the parlor cluzzet shelves; an' if you'll fetch 'em home, I'll scallop some white paper, jest as she liked, an' we'll set 'em up there."

Jonas wakened a little from his mental swoon. Life seemed warmer, more tangible, again.

"Law, do go," said the mother soothingly. "She don't want the whole township trampilin' up there to eye over her chiny. Make her as nervous as a witch. Here's the ha'-bushel basket, an' some paper to put between 'em. You go, Jonas, an' I'll clear off the shelves."

So Jonas, whether he was tired of guiding the impulses of his own unquiet mind, or whether he had become a child again, glad to yield to the maternal, as we all do in our grief, took the basket and went. He stood by, still like a child, while this comfortable woman put the china on the shelves, speaking warmly, as she worked, of the pretty curving of the cups, and her belief that the pitcher was "one you could pour out of." She stayed on at the house, and Jonas, through his sickness of the mind, lay back upon her soothing will as a baby lies in its mother's arms. But the china was never used, even when he had come to his normal estate, and bought and sold as before. The mother's prescience was too keen for that.

Here in this ground are the ambiguities of life carried over into that other state, its pathos and its small misunderstandings. This was a much-married man whose last spouse had been a triple widow. Even to him the situation proved mathematically complex, and the sumptuous stone to her memory bears the dizzying legend that "Enoch Nudd who erects this stone is her fourth husband and his fifth wife." Perhaps it was the exigencies of space which brought about this amazing elision; but surely, in its very apparent intention, there is only a modest pride. For indubitably the much-married may plume themselves upon being also the widely sought. If it is the crown of sex to be desired, here you have it,

under seal of the civil bond. No baseless, windy boasting that "I might an if I would!" Nay, here be the marriage ties to testify.

In this pleasant, weedy corner is a little white stone, not so long erected. "I shall arise in thine image," runs the inscription; and reading it, you shall remember that the dust within belonged to a little hunchback, who played the fiddle divinely, and had beseeching eyes. With that cry he escaped from the marred conditions of the clay. Here, too (for this is a sort of bachelor nook), is the grave of a man whom we unconsciously thrust into a permanent masquerade. Years and years ago he broke into a house,--an unknown felony in our quiet limits,--and was incontinently shot. The burglar lost his arm, and went about at first under a cloud of disgrace and horror, which became, with healing of the public conscience, a veil of sympathy. After his brief imprisonment indoors, during the healing of the mutilated stump, he came forth among us again, a man sadder and wiser in that he had learned how slow and sure may be the road to wealth. He had sown his wild oats in one night's foolish work, and now he settled down to doing such odd jobs as he might with one hand. We got accustomed to his loss. Those of us who were children when it happened never really discovered that it was disgrace at all; we called it misfortune, and no one said us nay. Then one day it occurred to us that he must have been shot "in the war," and so, all unwittingly to himself, the silent man became a hero. We accepted him. He was part of our poetic time, and when he died, we held him still in remembrance among those who fell worthily. When Decoration Day was first observed in Tiverton, one of us thought of him, and dropped some apple blossoms on his grave; and so it had its posy like the rest, although it bore no flag. It was the doctor who set us right there. "I wouldn't do that," he said, withholding the hand of one unthinking child; and she took back her flag. But she left the blossoms, and, being fond of precedent, we still do the same; unless we stop to think, we know not why. You may say there is here some perfidy to the republic and the honored dead, or at least some laxity of morals. We are lax, indeed, but possibly that is why we are so kind. We are not willing to "hurt folks' feelings" even when they have migrated to another star; and a flower more or less from the overplus given to men who made the greater choice will do no harm, tossed to one whose soul may be sitting, like Lazarus, at their riches' gate.

But of all these fleeting legends made to, hold the soul a moment on its way, and keep it here in fickle permanence, one is more dramatic than all, more charged with power and pathos. Years ago there came into Tiverton an unknown man, very handsome, showing the marks of high breeding, and yet in his bearing strangely solitary and remote. He wore a cloak, and had a foreign look. He came walking into the town one night, with dust upon his shoes, and we judged that he had been traveling a long time. He had the appearance of one who was not nearly at his journey's end, and would pass through the village, continuing on a longer way. He glanced at no one, but we all stared at him. He seemed, though we had not the words to put it so, an exiled prince. He went straight through Tiverton Street until he came to the parsonage; and something about it (perhaps its garden, hot with flowers, larkspur, coreopsis, and the rest) detained his eye, and he walked in. Next day the old doctor was there also with his little black case, but we were none the wiser for that; for the old doctor was of the sort who intrench themselves in a professional reserve. You might draw up beside the road to question him, but you could as well deter the course of nature. He would give the roan a flick, and his sulky would flash by.

"What's the matter with so-and-so?" would ask a mousing neighbor.

"He's sick," ran the laconic reply.

"Goin' to die?" one daring querist ventured further.

"Some time," said the doctor.

But though he assumed a right to combat thus the outer world, no one was gentler with a sick man or with those about him in their grief. To the latter he would speak; but he used to say he drew his line at second cousins.

Into his hands and the true old parson's fell the stranger's confidence, if confidence it were. He may have died solitary and unexplained; but no matter what he said, his story was safe. In a week he was carried out for burial; and so solemn was the parson's manner as he spoke a brief service over him, so thrilling his enunciation of the words "our brother,"

that we dared not even ask what else he should be called. And we never knew. The headstone, set up by the parson, bore the words "Peccator Maximus." For a long time we thought they made the stranger's name, and, judged that he must have been a foreigner; but a new schoolmistress taught us otherwise. It was Latin, she said, and it meant "the chiefest among sinners." When that report flew round, the parson got wind of it, and then, in the pulpit one morning, he announced that he felt it necessary to say that the words had been used "at our brother's request," and that it was his own decision to write below them, "For this cause came I into the world."

We have accepted the stranger as we accept many things in Tiverton. Parson and doctor kept his secret well. He is quite safe from our questioning; but for years I expected a lady, always young and full of grief, to seek out his grave and shrive him with her tears. She will not appear now, unless she come as an old, old woman, to lie beside him. It is too late.

One more record of our vanished time,--this full of poesy only, and the pathos of farewell. It was not the aged and heartsick alone who lay down here to rest We have been no more fortunate than others. Youth and beauty came also, and returned no more. This, where the white rose-bush grows untended, was the young daughter of a squire in far-off days: too young to have known the pangs of love or the sweet desire of Death, save that, in primrose time, he always paints himself so fair. I have thought the inscription must have been borrowed from another grave, in some yard shaded by yews and silent under the cawing of the rooks; perhaps, from its stiffness, translated from a stately Latin verse. This it is, snatched not too soon from oblivion; for a few more years will wear it quite away:--

"Here lies the purple flower of a maid
Having to envious Death due tribute paid.
Her sudden Loss her Parents did lament,
And all her Friends with grief their hearts did Rent.
Life's short. Your wicked Lives amend with care,
For Mortals know we Dust and Shadows are."

"The purple flower of a maid!" All the blossomy sweetness, the fragrant lamenting of Lycidas, lies in that one line. Alas, poor love-lies-bleeding! And yet not poor according to the barren pity we accord the dead, but dowered with another youth set like a crown upon the unstained front of this. Not going with sparse blossoms ripened or decayed, but heaped with buds and dripping over in perfume. She seems so sweet in her still loveliness, the empty promise of her balmy spring, that for a moment fain are you to snatch her back into the pageant of your day. Reading that phrase, you feel the earth is poorer for her loss. And yet not so, since the world holds other greater worlds as well. Elsewhere she may have grown to age and stature; but here she lives yet in beauteous permanence,--as true a part of youth and joy and rapture as the immortal figures on the Grecian Urn. While she was but a flying phantom on the frieze of time, Death fixed her there forever,--a haunting spirit in perennial bliss.