

Father Moody's Black Veil

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Advanced
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In 1770 the Reverend Joseph Moody died at York, Maine, where he had long held the pastorate of a church, and where in his later years his face was never seen by friend or relative. At home, when any one was by, on the street, and in the pulpit his visage was concealed by a double fold of crape that was knotted above his forehead and fell to his chin, the lower edge of it being shaken by his breath. When first he presented himself to his congregation with features masked in black, great was the wonder and long the talk about it. Was he demented? His sermons were too logical for that. Had he been crossed in love? He could smile, though the smile was sad. Had he been scarred by accident or illness? If so, no physician knew of it.

After a time it was given out that his eyes were weakened by reading and writing at night, and the wonder ceased, though the veiled parson was less in demand for weddings, christenings, and social gatherings, and more besought for funerals than he had been. If asked to take off his crape he only replied, "We all wear veils of one kind or another, and the heaviest and darkest are those that hang about our hearts. This is but a material veil. Let it stay until the hour strikes when all faces shall be seen and all souls reveal their secrets."

Little by little the clergyman felt himself enforced to withdraw from the public gaze. There were rough people who were impertinent and timid people who turned out of their road to avoid him, so that he found his outdoor walks and meditations almost confined to the night, unless he chose the grave-yard for its seclusion or strolled on the beach and listened to the wallowing and grunting of the Black Boars—the rocks off shore that had laughed on the night when the York witch went up the chimney in a gale. But his life was long and kind

and useful, and when at last the veiled head lay on the pillow it was never to rise from consciously, a fellow-clergyman came to soothe his dying moments and commend his soul to mercy.

To him, one evening, Father Moody said, "Brother, my hour is come and the veil of eternal darkness is falling over my eyes. Men have asked me why I wear this piece of crape about my face, as if it were not for them a reminder and a symbol, and I have borne the reason so long within me that only now have I resolved to tell it. Do you recall the finding of young Clark beside the river, years ago? He had been shot through the head. The man who killed him did so by accident, for he was a bosom friend; yet he could never bring himself to confess the fact, for he dreaded the blame of his townsmen, the anguish of the dead man's parents, the hate of his betrothed. It was believed that the killing was a murder, and that some roving Indian had done it. After years of conscience-darkened life, in which the face of his dead friend often arose accusingly before him, the unhappy wretch vowed that he would never again look his fellows openly in the face: he would pay a penalty and conceal his shame. Then it was that I put a veil between myself and the world."

Joseph Moody passed away and, as he wished, the veil still hid his face in the coffin, but the clergyman who had raised it for a moment to compose his features, found there a serenity and a beauty that were majestic.

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