

The Thing at Ghent

By Honoré de Balzac

A peculiar thing took place at Ghent while I was staying there. A lady ten years a widow lay on her bed attacked by mortal sickness. The three heirs of collateral lineage were waiting for her last sigh. They did not leave her side for fear that she would make a will in favor of the convent of Beguins belonging to the town. The sick woman kept silent, she seemed dozing and death appeared to overspread very gradually her mute and livid face. Can't you imagine those three relations seated in silence through that winter midnight beside her bed? An old nurse is with them and she shakes her head, and the doctor sees with anxiety that the sickness has reached its last stage, and holds his hat in one hand and with the other makes a sign to the relations, as if to say to them: "I have no more visits to make here." Amid the solemn silence of the room is heard the dull rustling of a snow storm which beats upon the shutters. For fear that the eyes of the dying woman might be dazzled by the light, the youngest of the heirs had fitted a shade to the candle which stood near the bed so that the circle of light scarcely reached the pillow of the death bed, from which the sallow countenance of the sick woman stood out like the figure of Christ imperfectly gilded and fixed upon a cross of tarnished silver. The flickering rays shed by the blue flames of a crackling fire were therefore the sole light of this somber chamber, where the denouement of a drama was just ending. A log suddenly rolled from the fire onto the floor, as if presaging some catastrophe. At the sound of it the sick woman quickly rose to a sitting posture. She opened two eyes, clear as those of a cat, and all present eyed her in astonishment. She saw the log advance, and before any one could check an unexpected movement which seemed prompted by a kind of delirium, she bounded from her bed, seized the tongs and threw the coal back into the fireplace. The nurse, the doctor, the relations rushed to her assistance; they took the dying woman in their arms. They put her back in bed; she laid her head upon her pillow and after a few minutes died, keeping her eye fixed even after her death upon that plank in the floor which the burning brand had touched. Scarcely had the Countess Van Ostroem expired when the three co-heirs exchanged looks of suspicion, and thinking no more about their aunt, began to examine the mysterious floor. As they were Belgians their calculations were as rapid as their glances. An agreement was made by three words uttered in a low voice that none of them should leave the chamber. A servant was sent to fetch a carpenter. Their collateral hearts beat excitedly as they gathered round the treasured flooring, and watched their young apprentice giving the first blow with his chisel. The plank was cut through.

"My aunt made a sign," said the youngest of the heirs.

"No; it was merely the quivering light that made it appear so," replied the eldest, who kept one eye on the treasure and the other on the corpse.

The afflicted relations discovered exactly on the spot where the brand had fallen a certain object artistically enveloped in a mass of plaster.

"Proceed," said the eldest of the heirs.

The chisel of the apprentice then brought to light a human head and some odds and ends of clothing, from which they recognized the count whom all the town believed to have died at Java, and whose loss had been bitterly deplored by his wife.