

MR. GRAY'S STRANGE STORY

Louisa Murray

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What may this mean
So terribly to shake our dispositions
With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls.
Hamlet, Act 1, Scene IV.

I am a minister of the Presbyterian Church of Canada, fifty years old, in sound health of body and mind. I have never had any belief in spiritualism, clairvoyance or any similar psychical delusions. My favourite studies at college were logic and mathematics, and no one who knew me could suspect me of belonging to that class of enthusiasts in which ghosts and other preternatural manifestations have their origin. Yet I have had one strange experience in my life which apparently contradicts all my theories of the universe and its laws, nor have I ever been able to explain it on any rational hypothesis. That there is some reasonable explanation I believe, and as there is no one living now, except myself, whom the facts concern, I have determined to give them to the world for the benefit of those who are interested in abnormal phenomena.

Twenty-five years ago I was minister of a newly built church, in a village on the shore of Lake Erie. The village had sprung up round the saw mills of Mason and Company, lately erected to turn the giant pines that grew on the sandy borders of the lake into lumber. When the pines were all worked up, the great saw mills and lumber yards sought another locality, and the village which had never had any individuality of its own dropped out of existence.

There was no manse, and I boarded in the house of the chief member of my congregation, Mr. Michael Forrest, who owned a fine farm of four hundred acres dose to the village.

The Red House Farm, as it was called from the colour of the paint Michael Forrest liberally bestowed on his buildings and fences, was in those days a pleasant place. There peace and plenty reigned, and everything within and without testified to good management, order and comfort.

My story opens in the parlour of the Red House, where, in the early afternoon of a splendid Indian summer day, a young man was writing at a desk placed under an open window that looked into a spacious verandah enclosed by cedar posts round which climbing plants were twined in picturesque profusion. This "best room" was never used by the family except on Sundays and festal occasions, and at other times was given up to the minister, the Rev. Gilbert Gray, who writes this narrative.

The hurry and bustle of dinner were over, the dinner things cleared away and the kitchen and dining-room made tidy. Mrs. Forrest was sitting in her rocking chair by the sunny kitchen window, and, her knitting in her lap, was taking her afternoon nap, her cat curled up at her feet. All was quiet in the house till light steps came tripping down stairs, and two pretty girls entered the verandah, sitting down on the high-backed bench of rustic work, each holding some bit of light needle-work in her hands. One was the only child of Farmer Forrest and his wife; the other a niece, brought up by Mrs. Forres was quiet in the house till light steps came tripping down stairs, and two pretty girls entered the verandah, sitting down on the high-backed bench of rustic work, each holding some bit of light needle-work in her hands. One was the only child of Farmer Forrest and his wife; the other a niece, brought up by Mrs. Forrest from infancy, and filling the place of a second daughter.

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I have said they were two pretty girls, but Marjory Forrest was beautiful. She was a tall, graceful blonde, fair and pale, with rose-red lips, violet eyes, and hair the very colour of sun-light. She looked like the heroine of some happy love poem—happy, I say, for there was no hint of tragedy in her pure, serene face. Celia Morris had a Hebe-like face and form, with bright chestnut hair, merry brown eyes and a laughing mouth, showing two rows of pearly teeth. She was just eighteen; two years younger than Marjory.

They made a charming picture in their pretty print dresses, fresh and spotless, their bright heads bending over their work, and catching the changing lights and shades coming in through the autumn-tinted leaves. But the picture darkened and dissolved as a handsome young man stood in the open arch of the doorway. The girls smiled a welcome, and, taking off his hat, he stepped in and threw himself down on a pile of mats made of the husks of Indian corn. He was the son of the head of the great lumber firm of Mason and Company. His father was a hard-working, self-made man, but he prided himself on bringing up his son to be a gentleman. Not an idle gentleman, however, and he had lately sent the young man to the mills to gain some practical knowledge of business before admitting him to a junior partnership. As there had been many satisfactory dealings between Mr. Mason and Farmer Forrest, Leonard Mason was made welcome at the Red House, and speedily established himself on a friendly footing. His frank, unaffected manner, and freedom from what Mrs. Forrest called "city airs," pleased the farmer and his wife; his knowledge of music and light literature charmed Marjory and Celia. The young people were on the most familiar and friendly terms, but Leonard's attentions were so equally divided between them that if he had a preference only a very close observer could have discerned it.

To-day he did not respond as readily as usual to Celia's lively chatter, and he soon got up from his seat on the mats, and, placing himself against one of the posts, from which point of vantage he could better see Marjory's face, said, "I am going to Hamilton."

Marjory looked up with a startled glance. Celia laughed a quick little laugh as she asked, "not this very minute, are you?"

"I am going to-morrow; my father wants me."

"Well, I suppose you mean to come back again," said Celia lightly.

"Yes, but not for a week. Shall you miss me very much while I am away?"

"Why, of course; there won't be any one to sing 'Come into the garden, Maud.' Will there Marjory?"

"No, indeed," said Marjory.

"I wonder which of you will miss me most. If I knew, I would ask her to give me a lock of her hair to wear round my wrist as a keepsake."

Celia's eyes were fixed on Leonard with an eager questioning expression, but he was looking at Marjory, who kept her eyes steadily on her work, though a faint blush was stealing over her face.

"I'll tell you what we must do," said Leonard. "I'll get two long and two short lots, and you must both draw. Whoever draws two long lots loses a lock of her hair to me."

"I know you won't refuse me," he continued pleadingly, "because there may be an accident to the train I am going on, and I may be killed, and then you'd be sorry for having been so unkind."

"What nonsense," cried Celia.

"Not at all," said Leonard, "wise men of old believed in the judgment of lots." And breaking off a slender vine-tendril he divided it into two long and two short lots, arranging them with some mysterious manipulations between his fingers. Then, kneeling on one knee, he held them to Marjory.

Slowly, with tremulous fingers and blushing cheeks, Marjory drew a long lot. Leonard seemed going to say something, but checking himself held out the lots to Celia. Celia did not blush; she grew deathly pale as she drew out her lot. It was a short one.

"I see you don't intend to lose, Miss Celia," said Leonard.

I think I hear now the wild, hysterical laugh with which she answered him. Then, I did not heed it.

"If you draw a short one this time," said Leonard, as he again held the lots to Marjory, "we shall have to try again," but as he spoke the second long lot was in her hand.

"Oh, kind fortune!" cried Leonard.

He tried to make Marjory look at him, but she would not meet his eyes. Still, those subtle signs that lovers learn to read the flickering flame on her cheek, the quivering of her lips and eyelids, who can say what—gave him courage. Snatching up her scissors, he held them over her head. "May I?" he asked beseechingly. With shy, timid

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grace she bent her fair head still lower; he felt the mute consent, and the next moment one long braid was severed from the rest and lying in his hand.

"Fasten it round my wrist with a true lover's knot," he whispered, softly touching her fingers with the braid. She took it at once, and as he pushed up his sleeve she wound it round his wrist, Leonard helping her to tie the mystic knot. Holding her hand, which did not try to escape, he drew her gently towards him and kissed the virgin lips that confidingly met his.

At that moment a shadow, as if from the wild flight of a bird, passed before the window at which I sat, and swift as an arrow from a bow Celia darted out of the verandah. Till then I had seen and heard all that passed in a sort of stupor, like that which sometimes takes possession of one who listens to his death sentence, though every word is indelibly written on the tablets of his memory. Unwittingly I had been playing the part of an eavesdropper. Now consciousness returned, and, like a man coming out of a trance, I got up and left the room and the house.

.....

I had walked fast and far before I returned to the Red House, and the moon, a brilliant hunter's moon, was flooding earth and heaven with light as I came in sight of the verandah. The inmates seemed all standing outside, among them a tall, finely-made young man, whom I at once recognized as Archie Jonson, farmer Forrest's nephew, generally supposed to be the heir to the Red House Farm. A marriage between him and Celia had been planned by the farmer and his wife while the cousins were children. Archie had always been devoted to Celia, and she had been fond of him till he tried to win her for his wife. Then, either from coyness or coquetry, she became cold and unresponsive. His entreaties for an immediate marriage were indignantly refused, and the utmost concession she would make was that after she was one and twenty she might think about it. A quarrel ensued, and, deeply wounded, Archie left his home. He was passionately fond of the water, and being known as a brave and skilful sailor he found no difficulty in obtaining the place of mate on one of the best schooners on the lakes.

I was surprised at seeing him, as he was not expected home until after the close of navigation, but still more astonished when he came to meet me before I reached the house.

"Where's Celia?" he called out as he came near.

"Celia?" I exclaimed, with a sudden feeling of alarm, "Isn't she at home?"

"No; Marjory thought she went with you to the village."

"She hasn't been with me. I haven't seen her."

"My God!" he burst out passionately; "where can she be?"

"Perhaps she's hiding from you, for fun," I said.

"No; they had missed her before I got here."

The farmer was calling us to come on, and, as soon as we were near enough, he told us that shortly after dinner he had seen Celia running down the road to the bush. "But you see," he said, "I was so taken aback by Leonard coming to ask me for Marjory, that I forgot I had seen her till this minute."

"She must have gone to get maple leaves for her Christmas wreath," said Marjory.

"But what keeps her so late?" said Mrs. Forrest.

"Why, you needn't be scared about her," said the farmer; "there's nothing to harm her. There hasn't been a bear or a wolf, or even a rattlesnake, seen in these woods for forty years; nor no such vermin as tramps, neither."

"There's that swamp," rejoined his wife; "she's always hunting for some sort of weeds in it, and I often think she'll fall in and get drowned."

"She couldn't be drowned if she didn't walk into the middle of it on purpose," said the farmer. "But where's Archie going?"

"To bring home Celia," Archie called back, as he walked off at a pace that soon took him out of sight.

"I'm sure I'm glad he's gone after her," said Mrs. Forrest. "She might have hurt her foot on a stub or a stone, and not be able to walk."

I suggested that Leonard and I had better follow Archie, and Leonard said he was going to make the same proposal.

"Archie won't want you," said the farmer. "If Celia has hurt herself, he can carry her home as easy as a baby; and like the job, too, I guess."

"Oh, let them go, father!" said Marjory. "You see how anxious mother is, and so am I."

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"All right, let them go if they like," said the farmer; adding in an irritable tone, that showed he was himself getting uneasy, "women are always making a fuss about nothing."

The moon was at the full, and the sky without a cloud. Every cluster of golden rod and purple aster along the fences, every stick and stone on the road were as dearly seen as at noonday. Leonard and I hurried on filled with an unspoken dread. The road was at first in a straight line, but on coming to a piece of marshy land it turned away to the bush; a path from this turning led to the swamp, a few yards distant.

These swamps are often places of surpassing beauty. There every species of wild fowl make their nests and rear their young broods, and the brilliant flowers and luxuriant leaves of all kinds of water plants form lovely aquatic gardens, richly coloured with ever-varying tints from April to December, and always the delight of an artist's eye. Round the edges of the swamp the water is usually shallow enough for the hunters to wade through in pursuit of their game, but in the centre it is often dangerously deep, and only to be crossed in a skiff or canoe.

Where the road divided, Leonard would have kept a straight course to the bush, but a terrible fear dragged me in the other direction. "No; come this way!" I cried, and he turned and followed me in silence. Faster and faster we hurried on till we reached the swamp. There a heart-rending sight met our eyes. Archie Jonson was struggling through the beds of water-lilies, reeds and rushes that obstructed his way, clasping Celia in his arms. Her long hair fell down dank and dripping, her arms hung stiff and lifeless, her face gleamed ghastly white under the strong moonlight. She was dead! "Drowned! drowned!"

As he ran towards him, Archie laid her on a grassy mound. Her limbs were not distorted and her face was composed, except that her eyes were wide open as if in startled surprise. "You are a doctor as well as a minister," Archie said to me, hoarsely; "see if there is any life left."

There was none. She had been dead for hours. As I said so, Archie sprung up from his kneeling attitude beside Celia, and turned to Leonard with a deadly rage and hatred in his eyes.

"This is your doing," he said.

"Mine!" exclaimed Leonard. "Are you mad?"

"I am not mad. There is Celia, the girl I loved better than my life, lying dead before my eyes, and you are her murderer!"

"Good Heavens!" cried Leonard, "What do you mean?"

"The shock has been too much for him," I said. "Archie, my poor fellow, you don't know what you are saying."

"I know very well what I am saying. he—that man there—fooled Celia, poor little innocent child, with his fine flattering manners till she thought he was making love to her, and when she found out he had only been play-acting with her, she couldn't bear it. It made her crazy, and she came down to the swamp and drowned herself. Oh, my God, she drowned herself. But it was he made her do it."

"I never made love to Celia in my life," said Leonard. "I loved Marjory from the first hour I saw her."

"Oh, I dare say. You were only playing with Celia, but she thought you were in earnest. Listen to me, minister," he continued, controlling his passion with wonderful self-command; "I had a warning, but I was a blind idiot and did not take it. Three nights ago, I dreamed that I saw Celia standing on a bank sloping down to a big piece of water, and a man was standing beside her, and while I was looking on in a stupid kind of wonder, I saw she was slipping down towards the water and not able to stop herself, and she held out her hand to the man and cried to him to help her, but he turned right round and went up the bank. Then I woke, and the dream seemed so real it made me feel queer; but I never had any belief in dreams, and when I got up and went out into the daylight, I laughed at myself for being frightened at a night-mare and thought no more about it. But the next night the dream came again; and this time I saw Celia throw herself into the water; and the man stood on the bank and looked on. Then I knew the dream was sent to warn me of some danger to Celia, though I couldn't tell what it meant, and I came home as quick as I could. And the first person I saw was the man I had seen in my dream—the man I am looking at now, and I heard he was going to marry Marjory; and Celia could not be found. Then when aunt Forrest mentioned the swamp, the meaning of the dream came to me like a flash, and I made for the swamp, but I had come too late—too late to save her, but not too late to revenge her wrongs."

I attempted to reason with him as well as I could, and tried to show him how wicked and absurd it was to let a dream—a nightmare, as he had himself called it—put such wild fancies into his head.

"And you cannot know that she drowned herself; it may have been an accident," I said.

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"It was no accident; she drowned herself in her madness. When I got to the swamp I saw a bit of ribbon hanging on the reeds, and I went on till I came to the deep water; there I found her. She had not sunk very far down because her skirt had caught on a stake that stood up there, and I got her out easily enough. But she was dead; and you, Leonard Mason, will have to answer to me for her death."

"I tell you I am innocent of her death as you are!"

"Can you swear it?" cried Archie. "Can you swear it while she lies there before your eyes?"

"I can, I never had any love for Celia, and I never tried to make her think I had. I swear it before the God that hears me!"

As Leonard uttered this oath, Archie kept his eyes fixed on him with piercing intensity; but Leonard met the searching gaze without flinching.

"If you have sworn to a lie," Archie said, "your sin will find you out, and you will have to answer to me for what you have done when you least expect it."

Then he wheeled round, and going to his dead sweet-heart, took her in his arms. "Go before me, minister," he said—"go before me, and tell them what is coming."

He would not allow me to help him, so Leonard and I walked on before, and Archie followed with his piteous burden. He was a tall powerful young man, besides being under such a strong excitement as gives threefold strength to every nerve, and he carried poor Celia's death-weight, as if she had been a living child.

But I can write no more of that night of grief and anguish. When the dismal morning came, Archie had gone.

.....

Three days after her death Celia was laid in the village graveyard; a peaceful spot away from all noise or traffic, on the side of a gentle hill within site of the Red House. No one but Archie Jonson, Leonard Mason and myself ever suspected the manner of her death. It was naturally supposed that while gathering flowers in the swamp she had fallen into some hidden pool from which the water plants that covered it would prevent her escape.

Archie was not at her funeral, nor had he returned to the farm, but, two days after she was buried, he wrote to Mrs. Forrest telling her that he had rejoined his vessel, the White Bird, which was going up Lake Superior with a cargo, the last trip she intended to make that season. The letter made no mention of Celia and was very brief, but it was calmly and coherently written, and the Forrests hoped he intended to come home when the schooner was laid up. But this gleam of light was soon lost in deeper darkness. In the middle of November a letter from the owners of the White Bird came to Michael Forrest, informing him that the vessel with all her crew had been lost on Lake Superior in one of those sudden storms which, after a long period of fine weather in the fall, sometimes break over the lakes. Her figure head, on which her name and that of the firm to which she belonged were carved, had been found floating, and recognized by another vessel, confirming the fears for her fate that had been felt. The bodies of the crew were never found, for the ice-cold depths of Lake Superior never give up their dead.

The winter passed slowly and sadly at the Red House, but with the spring came the promise of new hope and joy. Mr. Mason had built a pretty house for Leonard and his bride near the Mills, of which Leonard was to be chief manager. They were to be married in May, and the month famous for its caprice wore its fairest aspect that year. The sorrows which Marjory had gone through seemed only to have deepened the tender sweetness of her delicate beauty, and purified the happiness that illumined her lovely eyes. Leonard, as handsome and charming as ever, had grown more manly and thoughtful, and, if possible, was more in love with Marjory than ever. The old people gained new life from Marjory's happy prospects, and if I had not known what depths of regret sad remembrance can lie silent and secret in the human heart I might have thought that Celia and Archie were forgotten.

The wedding day came in warm and bright, and as full of opening buds and blossoms as if it had been expressly made for the occasion. The ceremony was to take place in the Red House parlour at six o'clock in the evening. The supper was to follow immediately. The bride and bride-groom were then to be driven to the nearest station to meet the train for Hamilton where they were to stay a few days and then go on to Niagara Falls to spend the remainder of their honeymoon there.

It was a busy day at the Red House. Two or three young girls from the village came to help in the pleasant task of putting all the rooms in festal array, and in preparing the dainties liberally provided for the wedding feast.

As the time for the ceremony drew near, the day's excitement rose higher and higher. The bridesmaids were

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dressing the bride, Mrs. Forrest and two favourite assistants were setting out the supper table. The farmer had taken most of the guests to see his new peach orchard. Two young men, one a cousin of Leonard's who had come from Hamilton to be the best man, were chatting and laughing through an open window with two pretty girls who were decorating the wedding cake with dainty little flags bearing embroidered mottos placed among loves and doves and other appropriate devices in sugar. Leonard and I were standing in the doorway of the verandah, and the eager bridegroom was looking at his watch.

"It only wants twelve minutes to six," he said, "I hope Marjory is ready."

"Your watch is too fast," I said, laughing. "Mine wants fully a quarter."

As I spoke a boy employed to do "chores" came round the barnyard and said, "There's a man wants to see Mr. Leonard Mason."

"A man—what man?" asked Leonard impatiently.

"Dun know. He says he must see you for a minute."

"Oh, hang it!" said Leonard. "Well, I suppose I can give him a minute," and he stepped out of the verandah. Then, looking back at me, he exclaimed, "I hope the day is not going to change."

It was already changing. Grey clouds coming up from the lake were creeping over the sun. An icy wind followed them, chilling me to the bone, and I heard a distant peal of thunder. Farmer Forrest came hurrying his guests into the verandah. "Is all ready, minister?" he enquired. "Where's Leonard?"

"He went to the yard to speak to a man that wanted to see him, I answered.

"Well, we'd best go into the parlour now, and receive the bride and bridegroom in state," said the farmer leading the way.

As Leonard did not come at once, I went to meet him, wondering at his delay. The clouds were growing darker; there was a sharp gleam of lightning, and the thunder that followed showed it was nearer. The storm was certainly coming up, but it might be only a shower.

I looked all round the horizon, and while I was noting the darkening clouds, two men going up the road to the graveyard came into my view; a gleam of the fading sunlight making them distinctly visible. The one in front was more than commonly tall, and led the way with swift, vigorous strides. He was dressed in what seemed a sailor's rough jacket and trousers, and a sailor's glazed hat with floating ribbons. His companion followed him with curiously unequal steps, as if dragged by some invisible chain. It was easy to recognize in this last Leonard in his new wedding suit; and as I gazed the conviction flashed upon me that the man in front was Archie Jonson. After all, then, Archie had not been drowned when the White Bird was lost. But by what strange power had he compelled Leonard to leave his waiting bride and follow him to the graveyard?

Such an extraordinary proceeding was both mysterious and alarming, and might be dangerous for Leonard; and on the impulse of the moment I followed them as fast as I could. I was a rapid walker, but they had a start of some minutes, and I could not overtake them.

When I entered the graveyard the whole sky was wrapped in a black pall except a little space above the plot of ground, bordered with periwinkles, in which Celia's grave lay. The white stone at the head of the grave and the figures of two men beside it stood vividly out under that clear space, while the black cloud came swiftly on as if to swallow them up. The tall man had his hand on the gravestone, his face was turned towards me and I could see every feature. It was Archie Jonson's face, lividly pale; or it might have been the shadow of the thunder cloud that made it appear so. Leonard's back was towards me, and he confronted Archie—if Archie it was—in a fixed and moveless attitude. I saw them distinctly for a moment; the next the black cloud that seemed almost to touch the ground covered them, and all was hidden from eyes. Then a bolt of blue flame with a red light in its centre shot from the cloud, and an awful crash seemed to rend the heavens. A blinding torrent of rain succeeded, but it ceased in a minute or two; the cloud passed on, and the sun, now near its setting, shone clear in the western sky. Anxiously I looked round for Leonard and his mysterious companion. Leonard was lying stretched on Celia's grave; Archie, or his avenging ghost, or whatever had assumed his likeness, had disappeared.

Going up to Leonard, I found him dead; killed by the lightning I supposed, though I saw no sign of its having touched him. As I was still stooping over, half stunned by the shock, his cousin and two or three other young men came round me. They had heard a confused account of our having gone to the graveyard, and while others were looking for us in the barns and out-houses, they had come to see if it could be true. We made a rough litter of pine boughs on which we laid poor Leonard, the young men carrying the bier while I walked before, wondering

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how it would be possible for me to tell the awful tidings it was my hard fate to bring.

But it was not left to me. Marjory, who had been waiting and watching in an agony of terror at Leonard's absence, had seen the ominous procession coming down the hill, and before anyone could prevent her she was flying madly to meet it. Desperately I tried to stop her, but she broke away from me, saw her lover's dead body lying on the bier, and fell at the feet of the bearers in a death-like swoon; her dainty wedding dress and fair hair wreathed with flowers, lying in the muddy pools the thunder-rain had made.

It was long before she could be brought back to life, and then her mind was gone. She remembered nothing of the past, she had no recognition of the present; she knew no more, not even her mother; she never spoke, and did not seem conscious of anything said to her. She lingered a few days in this state, and then died so quietly that the watchers did not know when she passed away.

The poor old people did not long survive the wreck of all their earthly hopes. The Red House farm was sold, and Michael Forrest's property was divided among relations he had never known.

Leonard Mason's death was, of course, attributed to lightning. The "chore" boy's description of the man with whom Leonard had gone to the grave was so fanciful, and so mixed with improbable incidents, that his tale was not credited by anyone. From some dreamy, incoherent utterances of Mrs. Forrest's, it was afterwards believed that Leonard had gone to the graveyard at Marjory's desire to lay a wreath of flowers on Celia's grave; and when the conjecture was added that the unknown man must have been an express messenger from Hamilton, bringing the wreath that had delayed by some mistake, the mystery was supposed to be explained. As for the strange things connected with this tragedy that had come to my knowledge, I kept them hidden in my breast.

I have never seen or heard anything of Archie Jonson since his inexplicable appearance on that fatal day; and I have been informed that it was absolutely impossible the best sailor that ever lived could have escaped in such a storm as that in which the White Bird, with her crew, foundered.

LOUISA MURRAY

Stamford.