

GREEN ANNA KATHARINE

THE GRAY MADAM

Anna Green

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Anna Katharine Green

The Gray Madam / 1899

WAS it a specter?

For days I could not answer this question. I am no believer in spiritual manifestations, yet—
But let me tell my story.

I was lodging with my wife on the first floor of a house in Twenty-seventh street. I had taken the apartments for three months, and we had already lived in them two and found them sufficiently comfortable. The back room we used as a bedroom, and while it communicated with the hall, we invariably made use of the front parlor-door to go in and out of. Two great leaves of old mahogany connected the two rooms, and as we received but few friends, these doors usually stood half open.

One morning, my wife being ill, I left her lying in bed and stepped into the parlor preparatory to going out for breakfast. It was late—nine o'clock, probably—and I was hastening to leave, when I heard a sound behind me—or did I merely feel a presence?—and, turning, saw a strange and totally unknown woman coming toward me from my wife's room.

As I had just left that room, and as there was no way of getting into it except through a door we always kept locked, I was so overpowered by my astonishment that I never thought of speaking or moving until she had passed me. Then I found voice, and calling out "Madam!" endeavored to stop her.

But the madam, if madam she was, passed on as quietly, as mechanically even, as if I had not raised my voice, and, before I could grasp the fact that she was melting from before me, flitted through the hall to the front door and so out, leaving behind on the palm of my hand the "feel" of her wool dress, which I had just managed to touch.

Not understanding her or myself or the strange thrill awakened by this contact, I tore open the front door and looked out, expecting, of course, to see her on the steps or on the sidewalk in front. But there was no one of her appearance visible, and I came back questioning whether I was the victim of a hallucination or just an everyday fool. To satisfy myself on this important question I looked about for the hall-boy, with the intention of asking him if he had seen any such person go out, but that young and inconsequent scamp was missing from his post as usual, and there was no one within sight to appeal to.

There was nothing to do but to re-enter my rooms, where my attention was immediately arrested by the sight of my wife sitting up in bed and surveying me with a look of unmistakable astonishment.

"Who was that woman?" she asked. "And how came she in here?"

So she had seen her too.

"What woman, Lydia? I have not let in any woman. Did you think there was a woman in this room?"

"Not in that room," she answered hoarsely, "but in this one. I saw her just now passing through the folding doors. Wilbur, I am frightened. See how my hands shake. Do you think I am sick enough to imagine things?"

I knew she was not, but I did not say so. I thought it would be better for her to think herself under some such delusion.

"You were dozing," said I. "If you had seen a woman here, you could tell me how she looked."

"And I can," my wife broke in excitedly. "She was like the ghosts we read of, only that her dress and the veil or drapery she wore were all gray. Didn't you see her? You must have seen her. She went right by you—a gray woman, all gray; a lady, Wilbur, and slightly lame. Could I have dreamed all that?"

"You must have!" I cried, shaking the one door communicating with the hall, so she might see it was locked, and even showing her the key of it, lying in its accustomed place behind the bureau

cushion. Yet I was in no satisfied condition myself, for she had described with the greatest accuracy the very person I had myself seen. Had we been alike the victims of a spiritual manifestation?

This was Tuesday. On Friday my question seemed to receive an answer. I had been down town, as usual, and on returning found a crowd assembled in front of my lodging-house. A woman had been run over and was being carried into our rooms. In the glimpse I caught of her I saw that she was middle-aged and was wrapped in a long black cloak. Later, this cloak fell off, as her hat had done long before, and I perceived that her dress was black and decent.

She was laid on our bed and every attention paid her. But she had been grievously injured about the head and gradually but surely sank before our eyes. Suddenly she roused and gave a look about her. It was a remarkable one—a look of recognition and almost of delight. Then she raised one hand and, pointing with a significant gesture into the empty space before her, sank back and died.

It was a sudden ending, and, anxious to see its effect upon my wife, who was standing on the other side of the bed, I glanced her way with some misgiving. She showed more feeling than I had anticipated. Indeed her countenance was a study, and when, under, the influence of my scrutiny she glanced my way, I saw that something of deeper import than this unexpected death in our rooms lay at the bottom of her uneasy look.

What that was, I was soon to know, for catching up from amid the folds of the woman's gray-lined cloak a long gray veil which had fallen at the bedside, she disposed it softly about the woman's face, darting me a look full of significance.

"You remember the vision I had the morning when I was sick?" she whispered softly in my ear.

I nodded, secretly thrilled to my very heart's core.

"Well, it was a vision of this woman. If she were living and on her feet and wrapped, as I have shown you, in this veil, you would behold a living picture of the person I saw passing out of this room that morning."

"I shall not dispute you," I answered. Alas, I had myself perceived the likeness the minute the veil had fallen about the pinched but handsome features!

"A forewarning," whispered my wife, "a forewarning of what has this day happened under our roof. It was a wraith we saw. Wilbur, I shall not spend another night in these rooms."

And we did not. I was as anxious to leave as she was. Yet I am not a superstitious man. As proof of it, after the first effect of these events had left me, I began to question my first impressions and feel tolerably ashamed of my past credulity. Though the phenomenon we had observed could not to all appearance be explained by any natural hypothesis; though I had seen, and my wife had seen, a strange woman suddenly become visible in a room which a moment before had held no one but ourselves, and into which no live woman could have entered without our knowledge, something—was it my natural good sense?—recoiled before a supernatural explanation of this, and I found myself forced to believe that our first visitor had been as real as the last; in other words, the same woman.

But could I prove it? Could the seemingly impossible be made possible and the unexplainable receive a solution satisfying to a rational mind? I determined to make an effort to accomplish this, if only to relieve the mind of my wife, who had not recovered her equanimity as readily as myself.

Starting with the assumption above mentioned—that the woman who had died in our presence was the same who had previously found an unexplainable entrance into these same rooms—I first inquired if the black cloak lined with gray did not offer a solution to some of my previous difficulties. It was a long cloak, enveloping her completely. When worn with the black side out, she would present an inconspicuous appearance, but with the gray side out and the effect of this heightened by a long gray veil flung over her hat, she would look like the gray lady I had first seen. Now, a cloak can be turned in an instant, and if she had chosen to do this in flitting through my door I would naturally find only a sedate, black-clothed woman passing up the street, when, rousing from the apathy into which her appearance had thrown me, I rushed to the front door and looked out. Had I seen such a woman? I seemed to remember that I had. Thus much, then, was satisfactory, but to account for her

entrance into our rooms was not so easy. Had she slipped by me in coming in as she had on going out? The parlor door was open, for I had been out to get the paper. Could she have glided in by me unperceived and thus have found her way into the bedroom from which I afterward saw her issue? No, for I had stood facing the front hall door all the time. Through the bedroom door then? But that was, as I have said, locked. Here was a mystery, then; but it was one worth solving.

My first step was to recall all that I had heard of the actual woman who had been buried from our rooms. Her name, as ascertained in the cheap boarding-house to which she was traced, was Helmuth, and she was, so far as any one knew, without friends or relatives in the city. To those who saw her daily she was a harmless, slightly demented woman with money enough to live above want, but not enough to warrant her boasting talk about the rich things she was going to buy some day and the beautiful presents she would soon be in a position to give away. The money found on her person was sufficient to bury her, but no papers were in her possession, nor any letters calculated to throw light upon her past life.

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