

The Gray Veil

By J. W. Henson

Past Difficulties . . .

The south was very slow recovering from the devastation brought on by the War of Rebellion. The Southern plantation owners before the war were a privileged people living in luxury such as their poorer neighbors could scarcely understand, and those rich could appreciate very little the repulsion of managing on one's own. On Sherman's march across Georgia during the War their manors were torched and the lands raped. He had allowed his army to pilfer the land and provide rations by taking their needs from those who were in the line of March. These favored people were now less prepared for hard times than were the shoddier neighbors who had spent their entire lives in search of the necessities for existence.

The common subsistence farmers of the area were steeped in superstition and ignorance which education was exceedingly slow in removing. Schooling, if any, was available only four to six weeks a year before the student was advanced to the next grade.

Shoes were luxury items that only donned the feet of the unfortunates on Sundays, if then. Rags of old clothes were passed down from parent to child, to younger child. Any piece of cloth that was found was made into a shirt, under garments, or used to patch less fortunate clothing. Discarded scraps of cloth were pieced by design into tops for quilts against the coming of winter.

As many as three generations of a family lived together and died all in the same house. The well and the infirm lay on their mattress ticks, which were stuffed, yearly with the season's fresh corn shucks. Dust mites, bedbugs and other vermin within the bed made their nightly rest far from a comfort. The sick were in need of unavailable medical care as they lay moaning and groaning their last days away. The sounds were horrors to the young children and tearful reverberations to their elders.

Along the fencerows and the verge of the forest there were berries in their season and the forest held chestnuts freshly fallen from their burrs. These foods were gathered in their time and preserved in glass jars or dried by the sun for winter's needs. Okra seed were gathered, stored, and later ground to be brewed as a cup of hot coffee in the winter months. Potatoes, yams, and turnips were poured out onto an elevated platform of straw covered earth. They in turn were covered over again with straw and then another layer of dirt. Wooden boards were then stood around them to form a cone or tent to protect the harvest from the rains of winter. When needed a plank would be removed and a hand would scratch for the produce.

Yet, poor as they were, these people were appreciative of the much goodness that God had sent their way.

More Difficulties . . .

The sultry night grew late amid a terrible thunderstorm that had blown in from the west.

Long, streaked, forks of brilliant lightening flashed through the gale of wind and blowing rain followed instantaneously by a sharp crack of exploding thunder. The timbers of the small log house creaked, groaned, and shuddered with each pounding from nature.

The little house had belonged to a Cherokee family in years prior to James and Laura Smith's ownership. It was rumored that the Indians had buried their dead around and even under the house. Many were the stories that were told of ghosts in and about the property; of knockings and spectral apparitions that brought on wonder and fright within the household.

Seated before a blazing fire in the open fireplace Laura spoke to her husband James, "This is a night that neither man nor beast should be about, but I fear we shall soon have to send little Edward to fetch Ma to come assist me with delivery. My pains are coming closer together and I am filled with a fear, a fear that the birth of my other eight children never gave me. There is something unearthly in this one, I can feel it, *I just know it!*"

James had dropped off to sleep just before Laura disturbed his rest with her declaration. The small kerosene light had been turned down to conserve the use of lamp oil. Back then sick rooms were dreary places even in the light of day, but they were terrors on such a night and at such a time as this.

James had worked hard in the fields all day as the poorer farmers in that time must. They had no slaves to assist with the chores to maintain life and forestall death. The rain was pounding the roof and the west side of the structure. The water was much needed for crops, but not in such fierce abundance.

Many of the newborn babies died before reaching their first birthday, and it was not unusual for Mothers to die also. Midwives, neighbors, or family were presented the chore of assisting with the delivering of babies and that without training except on the job.

"James! Awake Edward and send him for Ma. *Quick!* The time is come and its nearing midnight. Its a bad omen for a birth to be at the witching hour you know, and worse of all this is Friday the 13th!" The storm had moved on to the east with distant flashes of lightening and a delayed low rumble of thunder. A light rain was still falling and the wind was chasing after the storm.

A lantern was lit and Edward, roused from his bed, was on the way to his grandparent's farm for help. The red clay of which the area abounded was softened by the rain and worked its way between the toes and around the ankles of the young ten-year-old lad. Sloshing and squishing his way he moved ever forward through the night.

After seeing Edward on the way James returned to the kitchen and shook the ashes from the grates of the old cook stove. He built a brisk fire with the dry kindling that was stacked in the wood box behind the stove. The cast iron kettle was filled with water from the bucket standing near the sink and placed above the fire to be boiling hot when

needed.

The dogs were up growling, and barking as the young lad entered the front gate of his grandparents' homestead. His knocking brought no one for some time. Then at last he could see a figure moving along the hallway carrying a flickering kerosene lamp. His grandmother opened the entry to see the source of the hammering on the door in the dead of night. "Ma's bringing a little traveler into the world and needs your assistance. Do come in a hurry and help her deliver. Its time!" Edward puffed out, then turning he sprinted back into the night not waiting for an answer.

Grandma called for her older daughter, Dessie, to come and assist with the birthing. Laura's older sister and her Mother were soon out of the house and on their errand of mercy. Into the jaws of the inclement night the two ladies pushed their way through water and mud to the isolated farmstead.

Upon arrival coats, shoes and bonnets were removed and hung to dry before the blazing fireplace. Granny went into Laura's bedroom and all of the males were sent out. Laura was reclining upon the bed with a brace of pillows under her head and torso. Her knees were raised and spread. As Ma entered the quilt covering her was thrown back exposing the lower half of her body. Dessie was called in for the labor was well under way. Laura's breath was coming in long, slow gasps as dictated by the ripple and spasms of abdominal muscles. Occasionally she punctuated the delivery by screams, for the pain was almost unbearable. Then with a mighty strain the baby ejected itself.

Dessie picked up the infant girl while her mother cut and knotted the umbilical cord. Holding the baby inverted by the feet she gave her a swift, smart slap on the seat. There was a gurgle and then a powerful set of lungs told everyone in the house that there was a new heir. Dessie laid the baby on a receiving blanket, took a cloth from the hot water and started with the first bath. Then came a gasp and, "Look ma! Oh! Lard she has a gray veil across her face!" Just then the kitchen clock struck twelve.

That incident was remembered and told over the years as the young girl Betty grew. The significance of a gray veil was that she was born to be one with great psychic powers. And so it developed. Betty was warned by portends, and omens of things unseen by her peers. Many are the cases that could be documented of her great powers in predictions, wart removal and divining. One such singular case was noted when she and her husband were up town one day. Just as they opened the door to enter a quilt shop, Betty said that a cold breeze blew over her. She turned to her husband and said, "Sam Colson has just died!" Her man noted the hour and later in the evening word came that Sam had unexpectedly died and at the hour Betty announced.

Such powers are not understood or appreciated because of their supernatural nature. We fear most of all that which we do not understand. I have never known why it is that some people are alerted to things of the future, things that are remote and over which they have no ability to change or avert. They only saturate us with a fear of which we already have in abundance. Betty was judicial in the use of her supremacy and was self-inhibited from

publishing it unduly abroad.