

The Story of the Rippling Train

Mary Louisa Molesworth

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'Let's tell ghost stories then,' said Gladys.

'Aren't you tired of them? One hears nothing else nowadays. And they're all "authentic," really vouched for, only you never see the person who saw or heard or felt the ghost. It is always somebody's sister or cousin, or friend's friend,' objected young Mrs Snowdon, another of the guests at the Quarries.

'I don't know that that is quite a reasonable ground for discrediting them en masse,' said her husband. 'It is natural enough, indeed inevitable, that the principal or principals in such cases should be much more rarely come across than the stories themselves. A hundred people can repeat the story, but the author, or rather hero, of it, can't be in a hundred places at once. You don't disbelieve in any other statement or narrative merely because you have never seen the prime mover in it?'

'But I didn't say I discredited them on that account,' said Mrs Snowdon. 'You take one up so, Archie. I'm not logical and reasonable—I don't pretend to be. If I meant anything, it was that a ghost story would have a great pull over other ghost stories if one could see the person it happened to. One does get rather provoked at never coming across him or her,' she added, a little petulantly.

She was tired; they were all rather tired, for it was the first evening since the party had assembled at the large country house known as 'The Quarries', on which there was not to be dancing, with the additional fatigue of 'ten miles there and ten back again'; and three or four evenings of such doings without intermission tell, even on the young and vigorous.

Tonight, various less energetic ways of passing the evening had been proposed. Music, games, reading aloud, recitation—none had found favour in everybody's sight, and now Gladys Lloyd's proposal that they should 'tell ghost stories', seemed likely to fall flat also.

For a moment or two no one answered Mrs Snowdon's last remarks. Then, somewhat to everybody's surprise, the young daughter of the house turned to her mother.

'Mamma,' she said, 'don't be vexed with me—I know you warned me once to be careful how I spoke of it; but wouldn't it be nice if Uncle Paul would tell us his ghost story? And then, Mrs Snowdon,' she went on, 'you could always say you had heard one ghost story at or from—which should I say?—headquarters.'

Lady Denholme glanced round half nervously before she replied.

'Locally speaking, it would not be at headquarters, Nina', she said. 'The Quarries was not the scene of your uncle's ghost story. But I almost think it is better not to speak about it—I am not sure that he would like it mentioned, and he will be coming in a moment. He had only a note to write,'

'I do wish he would tell it to us,' said Nina regretfully. 'Don't you think, mamma, I might just run to the study and ask him, and if he did not like the idea he might say so to me, and no one would seem to know anything about it? Uncle Paul is so kind—I'm never afraid of asking him any favour.'

'Thank you, Nina, for your good opinion of me; you see there is no rule without exceptions; listeners do sometimes hear pleasant things of themselves,' said Mr Marischal, as he at that moment came round the screen which half concealed the doorway. 'What is the special favour you were thinking of asking me?'

Nina looked rather taken aback.

'How softly you opened the door, Uncle Paul,' she said. 'I would not have spoken of you if I had known you were there.'

'But after all you were saying no harm,' observed her brother Michael. 'And for my part I don't believe Uncle Paul would mind our asking him what we were speaking of.'

'What was it?' asked Mr Marischal. 'I think, as I have heard so much, you may as well tell me the whole.'

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'It was only—,' began Nina, but her mother interrupted her.

'I have told Nina not to speak of it, Paul,' she said anxiously; 'but—it was only that all these young people are talking about ghost stories, and they want you to tell them your own strange experience. You must not be vexed with them.'

'Vexed,' said Mr Marischal; 'not in the least.' But for a moment or two he said no more, and even pretty spoilt Mrs Snowdon looked a little uneasy.

'You shouldn't have persisted, Nina,' she whispered.

Mr Marischal must have had unusually quick ears. He looked up and smiled.

'I really don't mind telling you all there is to hear,' he said. 'At one time I had a sort of dislike to mentioning the story, for the sake of others. The details would have led to its being recognized—and it might have been painful. But there is no one now living to whom it would matter—you know,' he added, turning to his sister, 'her husband is dead, too.'

Lady Denholme shook her head.

'No,' she said, 'I did not hear.'

'Yes,' said her brother, 'I saw his death in the papers last year. He had married again, I believe.'

There is not now, therefore, any reason why I should not tell the story, if it will interest you,' he went on, turning to the others. 'And there is not very much to tell. Not worth making such a preamble about. It was—let me see—yes, it must be nearly fifteen years ago.'

'Wait a moment, Uncle Paul,' said Nina, 'Yes, that's all right, Gladys. You and I will hold each other's hands, and pinch hard if we get very frightened.'

'Thank you,' Miss Lloyd replied. 'On the whole I should prefer for you not to hold my hand.'

'But I won't pinch you so as to hurt,' said Nina, reassuringly; 'and it isn't as if we were in the dark.'

'Shall I turn down the lamps?' asked Mr Snowdon.

'No, no,' exclaimed his wife.

'There really is nothing frightening—scarcely even "creepy", in my story at all,' said Mr Marischal, half apologetically. 'You make me feel like an impostor.'

'Oh no, Uncle Paul, don't say that. It is all my fault for interrupting,' said Nina. 'Now go on, please. I have Gladys's hand all the same,' she added, sotto voce; 'it's just as well to be prepared.'

'Well then,' began Mr Marischal once more, it must be nearly fifteen years ago. And I had not seen her for fully ten years before that again! I was not thinking of her in the least; in a sense I had really forgotten her: she had quite gone out of my life—that has always struck me as a very curious point in the story,' he added parenthetically.

'Won't you tell us who "she" was, Uncle Paul?' asked Nina, half shyly.

'Oh yes, I was going to do so. I am not skilled in story-telling, you see. She was, at the time I first knew her—at the only time indeed that I knew her—a very sweet and attractive girl, named Maud Bertram. She was very pretty—more than pretty, for she had remarkably regular features—her profile was always admired, and a tall and graceful figure. And she was a bright and happy creature too; that perhaps was almost her greatest charm. You will wonder—I see the question hovering on your lips, Miss Lloyd, and on yours too, Mrs Snowdon—why if I admired and liked her so much I did not go further. And I will tell you frankly that I did not because I dared not. I had then no prospect of being able to marry for years to come, and I was not very young. I was already nearly thirty, and Maud was quite ten years younger. I was wise enough and old enough to realize the situation thoroughly, and to be on my guard.'

'And Maud?' asked Mrs Snowdon.

'She was surrounded by admirers—it seemed to me then that it would have been insufferable conceit to have even asked myself if it could matter to her. It was only in the light of after events that the possibility of my having been mistaken occurred to me. And I don't even now see that I could have acted otherwise—' here Uncle Paul sighed a little. We were the best of friends. She knew that I admired her, and she seemed to take a frank pleasure in its being so. I had always hoped that she really liked and trusted me as a friend, but no more. The last time I saw her was just before I started for Portugal, 'here I remained three years. When I returned to London Maud had been married for two years, and had gone straight out to India on her marriage, and except by some few friends who had known us both intimately I seldom heard her mentioned. And time passed—I cannot say I had exactly

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forgotten her, but she was not much or often in my thoughts. I was a busy and much absorbed man, and life had proved a serious matter to me. Now and then some passing resemblance would recall her to my mind—once especially when I had been asked to look in to see the young wife of one of my cousins in her court-dress, something in her figure and bearing brought back Maud to my memory, for it was thus, in full dress, that I had last seen her, and thus, perhaps unconsciously, her image had remained photographed on my brain. But as far as I can recollect at the time when the occurrence I am going to relate to you happened, I had not been thinking of Maud Bertram for months. I was in London just then, staying with my brother, my eldest brother, who had been married for several years and lived in our own old town house in —Square. It was in April, a clear spring day, with no fog or half-lights about, and it was not yet four o'clock in the afternoon—not very ghost-like circumstances, you will admit. I had come home early from my club—it was a sort of holiday time with me just then for a few weeks—intending to get some letters written which had been on my mind for some days, and I had sauntered into the library, a pleasant, fair-sized room lined with books, on the first-floor.

Before setting to work I sat down for a moment or two in an easy-chair by the fire, for it was still cool enough weather to make a fire desirable, and began thinking over my letters. No thought, no shadow of a thought of my old friend Miss Bertram was present with me, of that I am perfectly certain. The door was on the same side of the room as the fireplace; as I sat there, half facing the fire, I also half faced the door. I had not shut it properly on coming in, I had only closed it without turning the handle, and I did not feel surprised when it slowly and noiselessly swung open, till it stood right out into the room, concealing the actual doorway from my view. You will perhaps understand the position better if you think of the door as just then acting like a screen to the doorway. From where I sat I could not have seen anyone entering the room till he or she had got beyond the door itself I glanced up, half expecting to see someone come in, but there was no one; the door had swung open of itself. For the moment I sat on, with only the vague thought passing through my mind, "I must shut it before I begin to write."

'But suddenly I found my eyes fixing themselves on the carpet; something had come within their range of vision, compelling their attention in a mechanical sort of way. What was it?.' "Smoke," was my first idea. 'Can there be anything on fire?' But I dismissed the notion almost as soon as it suggested itself. The something, faint and shadowy, that came slowly rippling itself in as it were, beyond the dark wood of the open door, was yet too material for "smoke". My next idea was a curious one: "It looks like soapy water," I said to myself; "can one of the housemaids have been scrubbing, and upset a pail on the stairs?" For the stair to the next floor almost faced the library door. But—no, I rubbed my eyes and looked again—the soapy water theory gave way. The wavy something that kept gliding, rippling in, gradually assumed a more substantial appearance. It was—yes, I suddenly became convinced of it, it was ripples of soft silken stuff, creeping in as if in some mysterious way unfolded or unrolled, not jerkily or irregularly, but glidingly and smoothly, like little wavelets on the sea-shore.

'And I sat there and gazed. "Why did you not jump up and look behind the door to see what it was?" you may reasonably ask. That question I cannot answer. Why I sat still, as if bewitched, or under some irresistible influence, I cannot tell, but so it was.

'And it—came always rippling in, till at last it began to rise as it still came on, and I saw that a figure, a tall graceful woman's figure, was slowly advancing, backwards of course, into the room, and that the waves of pale silk—a very delicate shade of pearly grey I think it must have been—were in fact the lower portion of a long court-train, the upper part of which hung in deep folds from the lady's waist, She moved in—I cannot describe the motion, it was not like ordinary walking or stepping backwards—till the whole of her figure and the clear profile of her face and head were distinctly visible, and when at last she stopped and stood there full in my view just, but only just beyond the door, I saw—it came upon me like a flash, that she was no stranger to me, this mysterious visitant! I recognized, unchanged it seemed to me since the day, ten years ago, when I had last seen her, the beautiful features of Maud Bertram.'

Mr Marischal stopped a moment. Nobody spoke. Then he went on again.

'I should not have said "unchanged". There was one great change in the sweet face. You remember my telling you that one of my girlfriend's greatest charms was her bright sunny happiness—she never seemed gloomy or depressed or dissatisfied, seldom even pensive. But in this respect the face I sat there gazing at was utterly unlike Maud Bertram's. Its expression, as she—or 'it'—stood there looking, not towards me, but out beyond, as if at someone or something outside the doorway, was of the profoundest sadness. Anything so sad I have never seen in

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a human face, and I trust I never may. But I sat on, as motionless almost as she, gazing at her fixedly, with no desire, no power perhaps, to move or approach more nearly to the phantom. I was not in the least frightened. I knew it was a phantom, but I felt paralysed and as if I myself had somehow got outside of ordinary conditions. And there I sat—staring at Maud, and there she stood, gazing before her with that terrible, unspeakable sadness in her face, which, even though I felt no fear, seemed to freeze me with a kind of unutterable pity.

I don't know how long I had sat thus, or how long I might have continued to sit there, almost as if in a trance, when suddenly I heard the front-door bell ring. It seemed to awaken me. I started up and glanced round, half-expecting that I should find the vision dispelled. But no; she was still there, and I sank back into my seat just as I heard my brother coming quickly upstairs.

He came towards the library, and seeing the door wide open walked in, and I, still gazing, saw his figure pass through that of the woman in the doorway as you may walk through a wreath of mist or smoke—only, don't misunderstand me, the figure of Maud till that moment had had nothing unsubstantial about it. She had looked to me, as she stood there, literally and exactly like a living woman—the shade of her dress, the colour of her hair, the few ornaments she wore, all were as defined and clear as yours, Nina, at the present moment, and remained so, or perhaps became so again as soon as my brother was well within the room. He came forward, addressing me by name, but I answered him in a whisper, begging him to be silent and to sit down on the seat opposite me for a moment or two. He did so, though he was taken aback by my strange manner, for I still kept my eyes fixed on the door. I had a queer consciousness that if I looked away it would fade, and I wanted to keep cool and see what would happen. I asked Herbert in a low voice if he saw nothing, but though he mechanically followed the direction of my eyes, he shook his head in bewilderment. And for a moment or two he remained thus. Then I began to notice that the figure was growing less clear, as if it were receding, yet without growing smaller to the sight; it grew fainter and vaguer, the colours grew hazy. I rubbed my eyes once or twice with a half idea that my long watching was making them misty, but it was not so. My eyes were not at fault—slowly but surely Maud Bertram, or her ghost, melted away, till all trace of her had gone. I saw again the familiar pattern of the carpet where she had stood and the objects of the room that had been hidden by her draperies—all again in the most commonplace way: but she was gone, quite gone.

Then Herbert, seeing me relax my intense gaze, began to question me. I told him exactly what I have told you. He answered, as every common—sensible person of course would, that it was strange, but that such things did happen sometimes, and were classed by the wise under the head of "optical delusions". I was not well, perhaps, he suggested. Been overworking? Had I not better see a doctor? But I shook my head. I was quite well, and I said so. And perhaps he was right, it might be an optical delusion only. I had never had any experience of such things.

"All the same," I said, "I shall mark down the date."

Herbert laughed and said that was what people always did in such cases. If he knew where Mrs — then was, he would write to her, just for the fun of the thing, and ask her to be so good as to look up in her diary, if she kept one, and let us know what she had been doing on that particular day—"the 6th of April, isn't it?" he said—when I would have it her wraith had paid me a visit, I let him talk. It seemed to remove the strange, painful impression—painful because of that terrible sadness in the sweet face. But we neither of us knew where she was, we scarcely remembered her married name! And so there was nothing to be done—except, what I did at once in spite of Herbert's rallying—to mark down the day and hour with scrupulous exactness in my diary.

Time passed. I had not forgotten my strange experience, but of course the impression of it lessened by degrees till it seemed more like a curious dream than anything more real, when one day I did hear of poor Maud again. "Poor" Maud I cannot help calling her. I heard of her indirectly, and probably, but for the sadness of her story, I should never have heard it at all. It was a friend of her husband's family who had mentioned the circumstances in the hearing of a friend of mine, and one day something brought round the conversation to old times, and he startled me by suddenly enquiring if I remembered Maud Bertram. I said, of course, I did. Did he know anything of her? And then he told me.

'She was dead—she had died some months ago after a long and trying illness, the result of a terrible accident, She had caught fire one evening when dressed for some grand entertainment or other, and though her injuries did not seem likely to be fatal at the time, she had never recovered the shock.

"She was so pretty," my friend said, "and one of the saddest parts of it was that I hear she was terrifically disfigured, and she took this most sadly to heart. The right side of her face was utterly mined, and the sight of the

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right eye lost, though, strange to say, the left side entirely escaped, and seeing her in profile one would have had no notion of what had happened. Was it not sad?

She was such a sweet bright creature."

'I did not tell him my story, for I did not want it chattered about, but a strange sort of shiver ran through me at his words. It was the left side of her face only that the wraith of my poor friend had allowed me to see.

'Oh, Uncle Paul!' exclaimed Nina.

'And—as to the dates?' enquired Mr Snowdon.

'I never knew the exact date of the accident,' said Mr Marischal, 'but that of her death was fully six months after I had seen her. And in my own mind, I have never made any doubt that it was at, or about, probably a short time after, the accident that she came to me. It seemed a kind of appeal for sympathy—and—a farewell also, poor child.'

They all sat silent for some little time, and then Mr Marischal got up and went off to his own quarters, saving something vaguely about seeing if his letters had gone.

'What a touching story,' said Gladys Lloyd. 'I am afraid, after all, it has been more painful than he realized for Mr Marischal to tell it. Did you know anything of Maud's husband, dear Lady Denholme? Was he kind to her? Was she happy?'

'We never heard much about her married life,' her hostess replied. 'But I have no reason to think she was unhappy. Her husband married again two or three years after her death, but that says nothing.'

'N—no,' said Nina. 'All the same, mamma, I am sure she really did love Uncle Paul very much—much more than he had any idea of. Poor Maud!'

'And he has never married,' added Gladys, 'No,' said Lady Denholme; 'but there have been many practical difficulties in the way of his doing so. He has had a most absorbingly busy life, and now that he is more at leisure he feels himself too old to form new ties.'

'But,' persisted Nina, 'if he had had any idea at the time, that Maud cared for him so?'

'Ah well,' Lady Denholme allowed, 'in that case, in spite of the practical difficulties, things would probably have been different.'

And again Nina repeated softly, 'Poor Maud!'