



THE GREY CLOAK

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About MacGrath:

Harold MacGrath (September 4, 1871 - October 30, 1932) was a bestselling American novelist, short story writer, and screenwriter. Also known occasionally as Harold McGrath, he was born in Syracuse, New York. As a young man, he worked as a reporter and columnist on the Syracuse Herald newspaper until the late 1890s when he published his first novel, a romance titled *Arms and the Woman*. According to the *New York Times*, his next book, *The Puppet Crown*, was the No.7 bestselling book in the United States for all of 1901. From that point on, MacGrath never looked back, writing novels for the mass market about love, adventure, mystery, spies, and the like at an average rate of more than one a year. He would have three more of his books that were among the top ten bestselling books of the year. At the same time, he penned a number of short stories for major American magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Ladies Home Journal*, and *Red Book* magazine. Several of MacGrath's novels were serialized in these magazines and contributing to them was something he would continue to do until his death in 1932. In 1912, Harold MacGrath became one of the first nationally-known authors to write directly for the movies when he was hired by the American Film Company to do the screenplay for a short film in the Western genre titled *The Vengeance That Failed*. MacGrath had eighteen of his forty novels and three of his short stories made into films plus he wrote the story for another four motion pictures. And, three of his books were also made into Broadway plays. One of the many films made from MacGrath's writings was the 1913 serial *The Adventures of Kathlyn* starring Kathlyn Williams. While writing the thirteen episodes he simultaneously wrote the book that was published immediately after the December 29, 1913, premiere of the first episode of the serial so as to be in book stores during the screening of the entire thirteen episodes. Among MacGrath's short stories made into film was the 1920 Douglas Fairbanks Production Company's feature-length adventure film *The Mollycoddle* based on MacGrath's short story with the same title that appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1913. Directed by Victor Fleming, it starred Fairbanks, Ruth Renick, and Wallace Beery and was distributed through the newly created United Artists. It is said that during this same time, a young Boris Karloff, who previously had a few uncredited film roles, chose his stage name for his first screen credit in 1920 from the MacGrath novel *The Drums of Jeopardy*, which had also been published by *The Saturday Evening Post* in January of that year and which featured a Russian mad scientist character named Boris Karlov. The name Boris Karlov was used from MacGrath's book for the 1922 Broadway play, but by 1923 with actor Boris Karloff using the similar sounding variation, the film version renamed the character Gregor Karlov. Harold MacGrath's success made him a wealthy man and, although he traveled the world extensively, Syracuse, New York, was his home, and it was there in 1912 that he built an English country-style mansion renowned for its landscaped gardens. In an article in the April 23, 1932, issue of *The Saturday Evening Post* written under the title "The Short Autobiography of a Deaf Man", MacGrath told the public how he had struggled early in life as a result of a hearing impairment. At a time in history when deaf people were almost automatically considered as lacking intellectual acuity, he had hid this from his employer and others. Harold MacGrath died at his home in Syracuse a few months after the article was published.

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- *The Puppet Crown* (1901)
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Note

The author has taken a few liberties with the lives of various historical personages who pass through these pages; but only for the story's sake. He is also indebted to the Jesuit Relations, to Old Paris, by Lady Jackson, and to Clark's History of Onondaga, the legend of Hiawatha being taken from the last named volume.

Chapter 1

THE MAN IN THE CLOAK.

A man enveloped in a handsome grey cloak groped through a dark alley which led into the fashionable district of the Rue de Béthisy. From time to time he paused, with a hand to his ear, as if listening. Satisfied that the alley was deserted save for his own presence, he would proceed, hugging the walls. The cobbles were icy, and scarce a moment passed in which he did not have to struggle to maintain his balance. The door of a low tavern opened suddenly, sending a golden shaft of light across the glistening pavement and casting a brilliant patch on the opposite wall. With the light came sounds of laughter and quarreling and ringing glasses. The man laid his hand on his sword, swore softly, and stepped back out of the blinding glare. The flash of light revealed a mask which left visible only the lower half of his face. Men wearing masks were frequently subjected to embarrassing questions; and this man was determined that no one should question him to-night. He waited, hiding in the shadow.

Half a dozen guardsmen and musketeers reeled out. The host reviled them for a pack of rogues. They cursed him, laughing, and went on, to be swallowed up in the darkness beyond. The tavern door closed, and once more the alley was hued with melting greys and purples. The man in the cloak examined the strings of his mask, tilted his hat still farther down over his eyes, and tested the looseness of his sword.

"The drunken fools!" he muttered, continuing. "Well for them they came not this way."

When he entered the Rue de Béthisy, he stopped, searched up and down the thoroughfare. Far away to his right he saw wavering torches, but these receded and abruptly vanished round a corner of the Rue des Fossés St-Germain l'Auxerrois. He was alone. A hundred yards to his left, on the opposite side of the street, stood a gloomy but magnificent hôtel, one of the few in this quarter that was surrounded by a walled court. The hôtel was dark. So far as the man in the grey cloak could see, not a light filled any window. There were two gates. Toward the smaller of the two the man cautiously directed his steps. He tried the latch. The gate opened noiselessly, signifying frequent use.

"So far, so good!"

An indecisive moment passed, as though the man were nerving himself for an ordeal of courage and cunning. With a gesture resigning himself to whatever might befall, he entered the court, careful to observe that the way out was no more intricate than the way in.

"Now for the ladder. If that is missing, it's horse and away to Spain, or feel the edge of Monsieur Caboche. Will the lackey be true? False or true, I must trust him. Bernouin would sell Mazarin for twenty louis, and that is what I have paid. Monsieur le Comte's lackey. It will be a clever trick. Mazarin will pay as many as ten thousand

livres for that paper. That fat fool of a Gaston, to conspire at his age! Bah; what a muddled ass I was, in faith! I, to sign my name in writing to a cabal! Only the devil knows what yonder old fool will do with the paper. Let him become frightened, let that painted play-woman coddle him; and it's the block for us all, all save Gaston and Condé and Beaufort. Ah, Madame, Madame, loveliest in all France, 'twas your beautiful eyes. For the joy of looking into them, I have soiled a fresh quill, tumbled into a pit, played the fool! And a silver crown against a golden louis, you know nothing about politics or intrigue, nor that that old fool of a husband is making a decoy of your beauty. But my head cleared this morning. That paper must be mine. First, because it is a guaranty for my head, and second, because it is likely to fatten my purse. It will be simple to erase my name and substitute another's. And this cloak! My faith, it is a stroke. To the devil with Gaston and Condé and Beaufort; their ambitions are nothing to me, since my head is everything."

He tiptoed across the stone flags.

"Faith, this is a delicate operation; and the paper may be hidden elsewhere into the bargain. We venture, we lose or we win; only this is somewhat out of my line of work. Self-preservation is not theft; let us ease our conscience with this sophism ... Ha! the ladder. Those twenty louis were well spent. This is droll, good heart. An onlooker would swear that this is an assignation. Eh well, Romeo was a sickly lover, and lopped about like a rose in a wind-storm. Mercutio was the man!"

He had gained the side of the hôtel. From a window above came a faint yellow haze such as might radiate from a single candle. This was the signal that all was clear. The man tested the ladder, which was of rope, and it withstood his weight. Very gently he began to climb, stopping every three or four rounds and listening. The only noise came from the armory where a parcel of mercenaries were moving about. Up, up, round by round, till his fingers touched the damp cold stone of the window ledge; the man raised himself, leaned toward the left, and glanced obliquely into the room. It was deserted. A candle burned in a small alcove. The man drew himself quickly into the room, which was a kind of gallery facing the grand staircase. A sound coming from the hall below caused the intruder to slip behind a curtain. A lackey was unbarring the door. The man in the gallery wondered why.

"My very nerves have ears," he murmured. "If I were sure ... to pay madame a visit while she sleeps and dreams!" His hand grew tense around the hilt of his sword. "No; let us play Iago rather than Tarquinius; let ambition, rather than love, strike the keynote. Greed was not born to wait. As yet I have robbed no man save at cards; and as every noble cheats when he can, I can do no less. Neither have I struck a man in the back. And I like not this night's business."

On the cold and silent night came ten solemn strokes from the clock of St.-Germain l'Auxerrois. Then all was still again. The man came from behind the curtain, his naked sword flashing evilly in the flickering light. He took up the candle and walked coolly down the wide corridor. The sureness of his step could have originated only in the perfect knowledge of the topography of the hôtel. He paused before a door, his ear to the keyhole.

"She sleeps! ... and the wolf prowls without the door!" He mused over the wayward path by which he had come into the presence of this woman, who slept tranquilly beyond these panels of oak. He felt a glow on his cheeks, a quickening of his pulse. To

what lengths would he not go for her sake? Sure of winning her love, yes, he would become great, rise purified from the slough of loose living. He had never killed a man dishonorably; he had won his duels by strength and dexterity alone. He had never taken an advantage of a weakling; for many a man had insulted him and still walked the earth, suffering only the slight inconvenience of a bandaged arm or a tender cheek, and a fortnight or so in bed. Condé had once said of him that there was not a more courageous man in France; but he could not escape recalling Condé's afterthought: that drink and reckless temper had kept him where he was. There was in him a vein of madness which often burst forth in a blind fury. It had come upon him in battle, and he had awakened many a time to learn that he had been the hero of an exploit. He was not a boaster; he was not a broken soldier. He was a man whose violent temper had strewn his path with failures... In love! Silently he mocked himself. In love, he, the tried veteran, of a hundred inconstancies! He smiled grimly beneath his mask. He passed on, stealthily, till he reached a door guarded by two effigies of Francis I. His sword accidentally touched the metal, and the soft clang tingled every nerve in his body. He waited. Far away a horse was galloping over the pavement. He tried the door, and it gave way to his pressure. He stood in the library of the master of the hôtel. In this very room, while his brain was filled with the fumes of wine and passion, he had scribbled his name upon crackling parchment on which were such names as Gaston d'Orléans, Condé, Beaufort, De Longueville, De Retz. Fool!

Grinning from the high shelves were the Greek masks, Comedy and Tragedy. The light from the candle gave a sickly human tint to the marble. He closed the door.

"Now for the drawer which holds my head; of love, anon!"

He knelt, placing the candle on the book-ledge. Along the bottom of the shelves ran a series of drawers. These he opened without sound, searching for secret bottoms. Drawer after drawer yawned into his face, and his heart sank. What he sought was not to be found. The last drawer would not open. With infinite care and toil he succeeded in prying the lock with the point of his sword, and his spirits rose. The papers in this drawer were of no use to any one but the owner. The man in the grey cloak cursed under his breath and a thrill of rage ran through him. He was about to give up in despair when he saw a small knob protruding from the back panel of the drawer. Eagerly he touched the knob, and a little drawer slid forth.

"Mine!" With trembling fingers he unfolded the parchment. He held it close to the candle and scanned each signature. There was his own, somewhat shaky, but nevertheless his own. ... He brushed his eyes, as if cobwebs of doubt had suddenly gathered there. Her signature! Hers! "Roses of Venus, she is mine, mine!" He pressed his lips to the inken line. Fortune indeed favored him ... or was it the devil? Hers! She was his; here was a sword to bend that proud neck. Ten thousand livres? There was more than that, more than that by a hundred times. Passion first, or avarice; love or greed? He would decide that question later. He slipped the paper into the pocket of the cloak. Curiosity drew him toward the drawer again. There was an old commission in the musketeers, signed by Louis XIII; letters from Madame de Longueville; an unsigned *lettre-de-cachet*; an accounting of the revenues of the various chateaus; and a long envelope, yellow with age. He picked it out of the drawer and blew away the dust. He read the almost faded address, and his jaw fell. ... "To Monsieur le Marquis de Périgny, to be delivered into his hands at my death."

He was not conscious how long a time he stared at that address. Age had unsealed the envelope, and the man in the grey cloak drew out the contents. It was in Latin, and with some difficulty he translated it. ... So rapt was he over what he read, so nearly in a dream he knelt there, that neither the sound of a horse entering the court nor the stir of activity in the armory held forth a menace.

"Good God, what a revenge!" he murmured. "What a revenge!"

Twice, three times, and yet again he drank of the secret. That he of all men should make this discovery! His danger became as nothing; he forgot even the object of his thieving visit.

"Well, Monsieur?" said a cold, dry voice from the threshold.

The man in the grey cloak leaped to his feet, thrusting the letter into the pocket along with the cabal. His long rapier snarled from its scabbard, just in time. The two blades hung in mid air.

"Nicely caught," said the cold, dry voice again. "What have you to say? It is hanging, Monsieur, hanging by the neck." The speaker was a man of sixty, white of hair, but wiry and active. "Ha! in a mask, eh? That looks bad for you. You are not a common thief, then? ... That was a good stroke, but not quite high enough. Well?"

"Stand aside, Monsieur le Comte," said the man in the cloak. His tones were steady; all his fright was gone.

The steel slithered and ground.

"You know me, eh?" said the old man, banteringly. His blade ripped a hole in the cloak. "You have a voice that sounds strangely familiar to my ears."

"Your ears will soon be dull and cold, if you do not let me pass."

"Was it gold, or jewels? ... Jesus!" The old man's gaze, roving a hair's breadth, saw the yawning drawers. "That paper, Monsieur, or you shall never leave this place alive! Hallo! Help, men! To me, Grégoire! Help, Captain!"

"Madame shall become a widow," said the man in the mask.

Back he pressed the old man, back, back, into the corridor, toward the stairs. They could scarce see each other, and it was by instinct alone that thrust was met by parry. Up the rear staircase came a dozen mercenaries, bearing torches. The glare smote the master in the eyes, and partly dazzled him. He fought valiantly, but he was forced to give way. A chance thrust, however, severed the cords of his opponent's mask.

"You?"

There was a gurgling sound, a coughing, and the elder sank to his knees, rolled upon his side, and became still. The man in the grey cloak, holding the mask to his face, rushed down the grand staircase, sweeping aside all those who barred his path. He seemed possessed with strength and courage Homeric; odds were nothing. With a back hand-swing of his arm he broke one head; he smashed a face with the pommel; caught another by the throat and flung him headlong. In a moment he was out of the door. Down the steps he dashed, through the gate, thence into the street, a mob yelling at his heels. The light from the torches splashed him. A sharp gust of wind nearly tore the mask from his fingers. As he caught it, he ran full into a priest.

"Out of the way, then, curse you!"

Before the astonished priest, who was a young man, could rise from the pavement where the impact had sent him sprawling, the assailant had disappeared in the alley. He gained the door of the low tavern, flung it open, pushed by every one, upsetting

several, all the while the bloody rapier in one hand and the mask held in place by the other. The astonished inmates of the tavern saw him leap like a huge bird and vanish through one of the windows, carrying the sash with him. But a nail caught the grey cloak, and it fluttered back to the floor. Scarce a moment had passed when the pursuers crowded in. When questioned, the stupefied host could only point toward the splintered window frame. Through this the men scrambled, and presently their yells died away in the distance.

A young man of ruddy countenance, his body clothed in the garments of a gentleman's lackey, stooped and gathered up the cloak.

"Holy Virgin!" he murmured, his eyes bulging, "there can not be two cloaks like this in Paris; it's the very same."

He crushed it under his arm and in the general confusion gained the alley, took to his legs, and became a moving black shadow in the grey. He made off toward the Seine.

Meanwhile terror stalked in the corridors of the hôtel. Lights flashed from window to window. The court was full of servants and mercenaries. For the master lay dead in the corridor above. A beautiful young woman, dressed in her night-ropes, her feet in slippers, hair disordered and her eyes fixed with horror, gazed down at the lifeless shape. The stupor of sleep still held her in its dulling grasp. She could not fully comprehend the tragedy. Her ladies wailed about her, but she heeded them not. It was only when the captain of the military household approached her that she became fully aroused. She pressed her hand against her madly beating heart.

"Who did this?" she asked.

"A man in a mask, Madame," replied the captain, kneeling. He gently loosed the sword from the stiffening fingers. The master of twenty-five years was gone.

"In a mask?"

"Yes, Madame."

"And the motive?"

"Not robbery, since nothing is disturbed about the hôtel save in monsieur's library. The drawers have all been pulled out."

With a sharp cry she crossed the corridor and entered the library. The open drawers spoke dumbly but surely.

"Gone!" she whispered. "We are all lost! He was fortunate in dying." Terror and fright vanished from her face and her eyes, leaving the one impassive and the other cold. She returned to the body and the look she cast on it was without pity or regret. Alive, she had detested him; dead, she could gaze on him with indifference. He had died, leaving her the legacy of the headsman's ax. And his play-woman? would she weep or laugh? ... She was free. It came quickly and penetrated like a dry wine: she was free. Four odious years might easily be forgiven if not forgotten. "Take him to his room," she said softly. After all, he had died gallantly.

Soon one of the pursuers returned. He was led into the presence of his mistress.

"Have they found him?"

"No, Madame. He disappeared as completely as if the ground had swallowed him. All that can be added is that he wore a grey cloak."

"A grey cloak, did you say?" Her hand flew to her throat and her eyes grew wild