



Smithsonian Institution

National Museum of African American History and Culture

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"Gray Eyes"

A Story by "Jack Howard" of the Baltimore Colored High School

[[image]]

THANK God, the child has closed his eyes again and I can write. And yet, what is there to write? A cloudy maze of whirling, somber dreams; a picture of black night displacing day; a story of failure, wretched black, despairing, that must be broken through because of a promise made in an hour when a weak mortal dreamed.

I knew her in the old days and loved her. I say the old days because they seem so far back in the ages. Yet, only a few years have passed since I was just a school boy, dreaming of college and a brilliant future and dreaming, too, of love, as most folks are wont to dream. I used to sit and look at her for whole periods in school, my work, my ambition, all forgotten in the ecstasy of a greater longing.

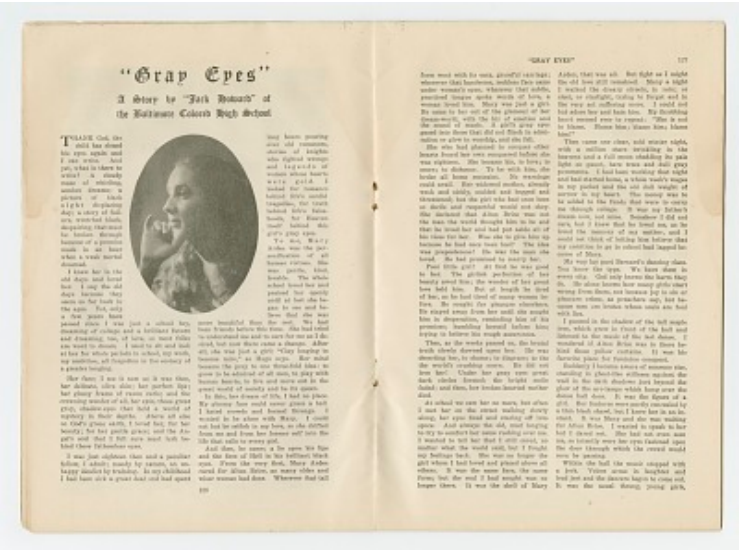
Her face; I see it now as it was then, her delicate, olive skin; her perfect lips; her glossy frame of raven curls; and the crowning wonder of all, her eyes, those great gray, shadow-eyes that held a world of mystery in their depths. Above all else on God's green earth, I loved her, for her beauty; for her gentle grace; and the Angel's soul that I felt sure must lurk behind those fathomless eyes.

I was just eighteen then and a peculiar fellow, I admit; moody by nature, an unhappy idealist by training. In my childhood I had been sick a great deal and had spent long hours pouring over old romances, stories of knights who righted wrongs and legends of women whose hearts were gold. I looked for romance behind life's sordid tragedies, for truth behind life's falsehoods, for Heaven itself behind this girl's gray eyes.

To me, Mary Arden was the personification of all human virtues. She was gentle, kind, lovable. The whole school loved her and praised her openly until at last she began to see and believe that she was more beautiful than the rest. We had been friends before this time. She had tried to understand me and to care for me as I desired, but now there came a change. After all, she was just a girl: "Clay longing to grow to become mire," as Hugo says. Her mind became the prey to one three-fold idea: to grow to be admired of all men, to play with human hearts, to live and move out in the great world of society and be its queen.

In this, her dream of life, I had no place. My gloomy face could never grace a ball. I hated crowds and formal throngs. I wanted to be alone with Mary. I could not but be selfish in my love, so she drifted from me and from her former self into the life that calls to every girl.

And then, he came; a lie upon his lips and the fires of Hell in his brilliant black eyes. From the very first, Mary Arden cared for Alton Brice, as many older and wiser women had done. Wherever that tall



form when with its easy, graceful carriage; wherever that handsome, reckless face came under woman's eyes; wherever that subtle, practiced tongue spoke words of love, a woman loved him. Mary was just a girl. He came to her out of the glamour of her dream-world, with the hir of emotion and the sound of music. A girl's gray eyes gazed into those that did not flinch in admiration or glow in worship, and she fell.

She who had planned to conquer other hearts found her own conquered before she was eighteen. She became his, to love; to scorn; to dishonor. To be with him, she broke all home restraint. No warnings could avail. Her widowed mother, already weak and sickly, scolded and begged and threatened; but the girl who had once been so docile and respectful would not obey. She declared that Alton Brice was not the man the world thought him to be and that he loved her and had put aside all of his vices for her. Was she to give him up because he had once been bad? The idea was preposterous! He was the man she loved. He had promised to marry her.

Poor little girl! At first he was good to her. The girlish perfection of her beauty awed him; the wonder of her great love held him. But at length he tired of her, as he had tired of many women before. He sought for pleasure elsewhere. He stayed away from her until she sought him in desperation, reminding him of his promises; humbling herself before him; trying to believe his rough assurances.

Then, as the weeks passed on, the brutal truth slowly dawned upon her. He was deserting her, to shame; to disgrace; to the world's crushing scorn. He did not love her! Under her gray eyes great dark circles formed; the bright smile faded; and then, her broken-hearted mother died.

At school we saw her no more, but often I met her on the street walking slowly along, her eyes fixed and staring off into space. And always the old, mad longing to try to comfort her came rushing over me. I wanted to tell her that I still cared, no matter what the world said, but I fought my feelings back. She was no longer the girl whom I had loved and placed above all others. It was the same face, the same form; but the soul I had sought was no longer there. It was the shell of Mary Arden, that was all. But fight as I might the old love still remained. Many a night I walked the dreary streets, in rain; or sleet, or starlight, trying to forget and in the very act suffering more. I could not but adore her and hate him. My throbbing heart seemed ever to repeat: "She is not to blame. Blame him; blame him; blame him!"

Then came one clear, cold winter night, with a million stars twinkling in the heavens and a full moon shedding its pale light on gaunt, bare trees and dull gray pavements. I had been working that night and had started home, a whole week's wages in my pocket and the old dull weight of sorrow in my heart. The money was to be added to the funds that were to carry me through college. It was my father's dream now, not mine. Somehow I did not care, but I knew that he loved me, as he loved the memory of my mother, and I could not think of letting him believe that my ambition to go to school had lagged because of Mary.

My way lay past Bernard's dancing class. You know the type. We have them in every city. God only knows that the harm they do. He alone knows how many girls start wrong from them, not because joy is sin or

pleasure crime, as preachers say, but because men are brutes whose souls are foul with lies.

I paused in the shadow of the tall maple tree, which grew in front of the hall and listened to the music of the last dance. I wondered if Alton Brice was in there behind those yellow curtains. It was his favorite place for feminine conquest.

Suddenly I became aware of someone else, standing in ghost-like stillness against the wall in the dark shadows just beyond the glow of the arc-lamps which hung over the dance hall door. It was the figure of a girl. Her features were partly concealed by a thin black shawl, but I knew her in an instant. It was Mary and she was waiting for Alton Brice. I wanted to speak to her but I dared not. She had not even seen me, so intently were her eyes fastened upon the door through the crowd would soon be passing.

Within the hall the music stopped with a jerk. Voices arose in laughter and loud jest and the dancers began to come out. It was the usual throng, young girls,

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