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"Spring shall plant  
and autumn garner."

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# *The* Curtain Island Mystery

L. M. Montgomery

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ne evening in mid September Ellis Abbey came down to ask me if I would go cranberrying on Lennox Island with him the next day. I needed no coaxing for a berrying expedition to Lennox was always good fun.

“We’ll sail over early in the morning, take a basket of grub, and make a day of it,” said Ellis. “Mother has been at me for a week to get her some cranberries. And as Thanksgiving will be here in two months and we must have some jelly for our gobbler I think it well to prepare for the future in due time.”

Lennox Island was one of several in Ascot Bay. They were all uninhabited and most of them were thickly wooded. Among the latter was Curtain Island, which was covered with pine and beech, except at its northeast corner, where there was a small cranberry bog. It was never visited on this account, however, as the berries were small and of poor quality.

“What’s that?” said father, who now came out on the porch, “Going cranberrying? Well, take care old Oliver’s ghost doesn’t catch you.”

We all laughed at this. Just then old Oliver’s ghost was a standing joke along shore.

Oliver Snyder, a weatherbeaten old fisherman at the harbor, had taken to insisting that Curtain’s was “ha’nted.” Several nights, when he had been out late in his boat, he had seen a mysterious light flitting over the cranberry bog or gleaming fitfully among the pines. Nobody else had ever seen the light, not even the men who were in the boat with him, but this only the more firmly convinced old Oliver that it was supernatural. A real light would have been seen by everybody. That he alone was able to see it argued it not of earth. Old Oliver took it for a “sign” and brooded over it. He believed that it portended his early death and neither argument or ridicule could shake his conviction.

“We’re not going to Curtain’s,” said Ellis, “and nobody has been seeing lights on Lennox.”

“Heard anything further about the Richmond burglaries?” asked father, turning to go in.

“Well, I heard to-day that Sheriff Pearson has offered a reward of two hundred dollars for information which will lead to their discovery and capture,” responded Ellis. “He is at his wit’s end. You heard about their breaking into Dan Burrell’s store last week and carrying off a lot of plunder? Since then they’ve robbed Abraham Gowan’s smoke-house of several hams. It is a mystery how they can cover up their tracks so completely. They must have a rendezvous and loot depot somewhere. In

Richmond most folks seem to believe that they have their headquarters inland, somewhere around Canthope, and it seems most likely.”

Ascot Bay was crescent-shaped. Albury Plains, where we lived, was on the eastern horn. Directly across the bay from us on the other horn was Richmond, a thriving fishing, farming and dairying village. For three months, more or less, Richmond had been terrorized by mysterious burglaries. Stores, warehouses, cheese factories and farmhouses had been broken into impartially and all kinds of booty carried off. This done, looters and loot seemed to vanish as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed them up.

After father had gone in Ellis said: “Are you going to Conley Academy, Kent?”

I shook my head “Can’t; times too hard,” I said, laconically.

Ellis nodded. “My case exactly. Well, can’t be helped, I suppose. So long. I’ll meet you at the Point in good time, wind and weather permitting.”

After Ellis had gone home I sat on the porch until moonrise thinking rather dejectedly over the matter referred to in his question. We both wanted to go to Conley Academy. We had passed the matriculation examination in June very creditably. But, much to our disappointment, there seemed to be no chance for further progress along that line.

The morning was fair and clear, with a good sailing wind. I met Ellis at the point where we hired Jim Snyder’s boat. Old Oliver, his father, looked at us gloomily.

“Steer clear of Curtain’s,” he said, warningly. “There’s nothing the matter with Lennox as I knows on—but Curtain’s—” old Oliver paused and shook his head as if to indicate his belief that all the powers of darkness had taken up their abode on Curtain’s.



*"steer clear of Curtain's"*

Ellis and I with a smothered laugh embarked and sailed away. Our trip over was pleasant and uneventful. We anchored in a small cove on the west of Lennox, waded ashore with baskets and buckets and set to work.

Lennox was rather peculiar in shape—more like a soup plate than anything else to which I can compare it. The rim was high and rocky, with a thick girdle of pines around it. The depressed centre was the cranberry bog. Here a perpetual calm reigned, blow what winds there might. Consequently Ellis and I did not realize that the wind kept increasing or that it had veered round northeast, and we got an unpleasant surprise when, about four o'clock, we went down to the shore. It was blowing a hurricane out behind the islands.

"Got to stay here all night," commented Ellis, briefly.

"If we were on Curtain's I would not mind," I said. "It's high and dry and there is better shelter."

"We can get there," said Ellis, promptly. "It's only a mile over and comparatively calm."

Accordingly we sailed across, sheltered from the gale by Bird Island, which lay between Curtain and Lennox to our right. We anchored in a cove on the east of Curtain's and soon found ourselves on shore.

We took refuge in a small tumbledown hut which had been formerly used by oyster fishermen but was now almost in ruins. We did not expect to be very comfortable for we were tired, wet and hungry, but we made the best we could of our circumstances.

"Wish we had some matches," I shivered. "A fire would fit in very well just now."

"I wonder if any of old Oliver's spooks will be around to-night?" said Ellis, jokingly.

He had scarcely spoken when he started, excitedly. "By jove, Kent, there's a light, sure enough."

"Where?" I exclaimed.

"It's gone now. But I'll swear I saw it not a moment ago on the edge of the cranberry bog."

"Will-o-the-wisp," I said, carelessly. But I will own that I thought of old Oliver, and a disagreeable crawly sensation traveled up my spine.

"Didn't look like that. More like—there it is again!"

"There's some one on the island besides ourselves," said Ellis. "Come on, Kent. I don't believe in spooks or ghosts or 'ha'nts' and I'm going to see who or what it is."

We at once ran down the avenue of hoary old pines and skirted the curve of the bog. At intervals the light glimmered out before us. Presently, as we rounded the scrub pines, we saw about ten yards away three men, distinctly visible by the light of a small lantern which one of them carried.

I was about to hail them when Ellis, as if guessing my intention, laid his hand on my arm.

"Easy, Kent; somehow I don't like their looks. Let's follow in silence."

Accordingly we dropped somewhat further behind. The men walked swiftly and appeared to be heading for the very heart of the island. They were muffled up in long coats and low pulled hats and, as Ellis said, they did look rather queer. There was nothing familiar about them. They could not be any of the harbor fishermen, as I had

at first thought.

On and on they went, never pausing to look behind. We were evidently striking right across the island and the men seemed to know the way well, although to me there seemed no trace of track or path. I reflected that if the light were to go out Ellis and I would be in a somewhat unpleasant predicament—in the heart of Curtain woods on a pitchy dark night.

In about three-quarters of an hour we had crossed the island and heard the surf thundering on the reef that stretched out from it in the direction of Richmond. Suddenly the men halted before the largest of five deserted oystermen's huts that were snugly hidden among the sheltering pines, extinguished their lantern and entered. A minute later a pale light gleamed from the one small square window.

Ellis and I, breathless from our tramp—for our mysterious quarry had travelled speedily—looked at each other in the gloom.

"Who and what are they?" I said.

"I don't know," said Ellis, "but I feel sure they are here for no good purpose. They are not fishermen who have taken refuge here from the storm and there's never any oystering in the bay now. I'm going up to look in at that window."

We cautiously stole up as near the hut as prudent and, standing on a small hillock about four feet away, we saw distinctly the interior of the room where the men were sitting. Two of them had their backs to us. The face of the third was plain in view and I started.

"That's Cy Golding from over Canthope way, Ellis," I muttered. "Great Caesar! Can these be the Richmond burglars?"

"I've been suspecting that ever since we saw them," said Ellis. "But we must have more proof than this. Careful now—this is risky, Kent. If they catch us I'm afraid we will disappear as mysteriously as Farmer Gowan's hams. Let's steal up and listen under the window—one of the panes is out. And if you hear a sound to indicate suspicion on their part bolt for the woods at once. Now!"

Tingling with excitement we crept up and crouched down under the window. The low voices of the men were quite audible. It did not take long to assure us that this was the gang of burglars who had terrorized Richmond. They were plotting another raid on Con Wherrison's store at Richmond Centre the following night.

Presently Ellis pulled me away and we stealthily retraced our steps to a safe distance and then scrambled down the bank to the shore around which we followed until we regained our hut. You may be sure we did not sleep much that night. Apart from our excitement we had a disagreeable fear that some prowling burglar might become aware of our proximity and make matters unpleasant for us.



The wind went down during the night and as soon as the first pale dawnlight was whitening over the faraway purple shores of the bay we got on board our boat and sailed away from Curtain Island with a feeling of relief.

Arriving home we took father into our confidence and then hitched up old Bess to the buckboard and started for Conley, there to interview the county sheriff. That night a well-armed posse went to Wherrison's store and captured the gang red-handed. Later on a good deal of the plunder was found stored in the huts on Curtain Island, except perishable articles, which they had contrived to dispose of.

Ellis and I obtained the offered reward and it meant Conley academy for us both. As for old Oliver, it was a great triumph to him that he really had seen lights and a great relief that they were not "ha'nts" and consequently did not forbode his approaching dissolution.

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *The Curtain Island Mystery* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]