

# THE PHANTOM WOMAN



*Published*

*May 1. 1799*

*for J. Doe.*

BY ANONYMOUS

# The phantom woman

By Anonymous (Victorian ghost story from the 19th-century)

He took an all-possessing, burning fancy to her from the first. She was neither young nor pretty, so far as he could see—but she was wrapped round with mystery. That was the key of it all; she was noticeable in spite of herself. Her face at the window, sunset after sunset; her eyes, gazing out mournfully through the dusty panes, hypnotized the lawyer. He saw her through the twilight night after night, and he grew at length to wait through the days in a feverish waiting for dusk, and that one look at an unknown woman.

She was always at the same window on the ground floor, sitting doing nothing. She looked beyond, so the infatuated solicitor fancied, at him. Once he even thought that he detected the ghost of a friendly smile on her lips. Their eyes always met with a mute desire to make acquaintance. This romance went on for a couple of months.

Gilbert Dent assured himself that nothing in this life can possibly remain stationary, and he cudgelled his brain for a respectable manner of introducing himself to his idol.

He had hardly arrived at this point when he received a shock. There came an evening when she was not at the window.

Next morning, he walked down Wood Lane on his way to the office. He always went by train, but he felt a strong disinclination to go through another day without a sight of her. His heart began to beat like a schoolgirl's as he drew near the house. If she should be at the window. He was almost disposed to take his courage in his hand and call on her, and—yes, even—tell her in a quick burst that she had mysteriously become all the world to him. He could see nothing ridiculous in this course; the possibility of her being married, or having family ties of any sort, had simply never occurred to him.

However, she was not at the window; what was more, there was a sinister silence, a sort of breathlessness about the whole place.

It was a very hot morning in late August. He looked a long time, but no face came, and no movement stirred the house.

He went his way, walking like a man who has been heavily knocked on the brow and sees stars still. That afternoon he left the office early, and in less than an hour stood at the gate again. The window was blank. He pushed the gate back—it hung on one hinge—and walked up the drive to the door. There were five steps—five steps leading up to it. At the foot he wheeled aside sharply to the window; he had a sick dread of looking through the small panes—why he could not have told.

When at last he found courage to look he saw that there was a small round table set just under the window—a work-table to all appearance; one of those things with lots of little compartments all round and a lid in the middle which shut over a well-like cavity for holding pieces of needlework. He remembered that his mother had one—thirty years before.

Round the edge of the table was gripped a small, delicate hand. Gilbert Dent's eyes ran from this bloodless hand and slim wrist to a shoulder under a coarse stuff bodice—to a rather wasted throat, which was bare and flung back.

So, this was the end—before the beginning. He saw her. She was dead; twisted on the floor with a ghastly face turned up toward the ceiling, and stiff fingers caught in desperation round the work table.

He stumbled away along the path and into the lane.

For a long time, he could not realize the horror of this thing. The influence of the decayed house hung over him—nothing seemed real. It was quite dark when he moved away from the gate, and went in the direction of the nearest police station. That she was dead—this woman whose very name he did not know although she influenced him so powerfully—he was certain; one look at the face would have told anyone that. That she was murdered he more than suspected. He had seen no blood about; there had been no mark on the long, bare throat, and yet the word rushed in his ears, "Murder."

Later on he went back with a police officer.

They broke into the house and entered the room. It was in utter darkness, of course, by now. Dent, his fingers trembling, struck a match. It flared round the walls and lighted them for a moment before he let it fall on the dusty floor.

The policeman began to light his lantern and turned it stolidly on the window. He had no reason for delay; he was eager to get to the bottom of the business. His professional zeal was whetted; this promised to be a mystery with a spice in it.

He turned the light full on the window; he gave a strange, choked cry, half of rage, half of apprehension. Then he went up to Gilbert Dent, who stood in the middle of the room with his hands before his eyes, and took his shoulder and shook it none too gently.

“There ain’t nobody,” he said.

Dent looked wildly at the window—the recess was empty except for the work-table. The woman was gone.

They searched the house; they minutely inspected the garden. Everything was normal; everything told the same mournful tale—of desertion, of death, of long empty years. But they found no woman, nor trace of one.

“This house,” said the policeman, looking suspiciously into the lawyer’s face, “has been empty for longer than I can remember. Nobody’ll live in it. They do say something about foul play a good many years ago. I don’t know about that. All I do know is that the landlord can’t get it off his hands.”

It was doubtful if Gilbert Dent heard one word of what the man was saying. He was too stunned to do anything but creep home—when he was allowed to go—and let himself stealthily into his own house with a latch key; he was afraid even of himself. He did not go to bed that night.

As for the mystery of the woman, the matter was allowed to drop; it ended—officially. There was a shrug and a grin at the police station. The impression there was that the lawyer had been drinking—that the dead woman in the empty room was a gruesome freak of his tipsy brain.

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A week or so later Dent called on his brother Ned—the one near relation he had. Ned was a doctor; perhaps he was a shade more matter-of-fact than Gilbert; at all events, when the latter told his story of the house and the woman, he attributed the affair solely to liver.

“You are overworked”—the elder brother looked at the younger’s yellow face. “An experience of this nature is by no means uncommon. Haven’t you heard of people having their pet ‘spooks’?”

“But this was a real woman,” he declared. “I—I, well, I was in love with her. I had made up my mind to marry her—if I could.”

Ned gave him a keen, swift glance.

“We’ll go to Brighton to-morrow,” he said, with quiet decision. “As for your work, everything must be put aside. You’ve run completely down. You ought to have been taken in hand before.”

They went to Brighton, and it really seemed as if Ned was right, and that the woman at the window had been merely a nervous creation. It seemed so, that is, for nearly three weeks, and then the climax came.

It was in the twilight—she had always been part of it—that Gilbert Dent saw her again; the woman that he had found lying dead.

They were walking, the two brothers, along the cliffs.

The wind was blowing in their faces, the sea was booming beneath the cliff. Ned had just said it was about time they turned back to the hotel and had some dinner, when Gilbert with a cry leapt forward to the very edge of the flat grass path on which they were strolling. The movement was so sudden that his brother barely caught him in time. They struggled and swayed on the very edge of the cliff for a second; Gilbert, possessed by some sudden frenzy, seemed resolved to go over, but the other at last dragged him backward, and they rolled together on the close, thick turf.

At this point Gilbert opened his eyes and tried to get on his feet.

“Better?” asked his brother, cheerfully, holding out a helping hand. “Strange! The sea has that effect on some people. Didn’t think that you were one of them.”

“What effect?”

“Vertigo, my dear fellow.”

“Ned,” said the other solemnly, “I saw her. It is not worth your while to try to account for anything. I have been inclined to think that you were right—that she, the woman at the window, was a fancy, that I had fallen in love with a creation of my own brain; but I saw her again to-night. You must have seen her yourself—she was within a couple of feet of you. Why did you not try and save her? It was nothing short of murder to let her go over like that. I did my best.”

“You certainly did—to kill us both,” said Ned, grimly.

Gilbert gave him a wild look.

After luncheon Ned persuaded him to rest—watched him fall asleep, and then went out.

In the porch of the hotel he was met by a waiter on his return who told him that Gilbert had left about a quarter of an hour after he had himself gone out.

Directly he heard this he feared the worst; having, as is usual in such cases, a very hazy idea of what the worst might be. Of course, he must follow without a moment’s delay; but a reference to the time-table told him that there was not another train for an hour, and that was slow.

It was already getting dusk when he arrived there. He felt certain that Gilbert would go there. He got to the end of the lane and walked up it slowly, examining every house. There would be no difficulty in recognizing the one he wanted; Gilbert had described it in detail more than once.

He stood outside the loosely hanging gate at last, and stared through the darkness at the shabby stucco front and rank garden.

He went down a flight of steps to the back door, and finding it unfastened, stepped into a stone passage. It was one of the problems of the place that he should have avoided the main entrance door with a half-admitted dread, and that, only half admitting still, he was afraid to mount the long flight of stone stairs leading from the servants’ quarters. However, he pulled himself together and went up to the room.

It was quite dark inside. He heard something scuttle across the floor; he felt the grit and dust of years under his feet. He struck a match—just as Gilbert had done—and looked first at the recess

in which the window was built. The match flared round the room for a moment and gave him a flash picture of his surroundings. He saw the stripes of gaudy paper moving almost imperceptibly, like tentacles of some sea monster, from the wall; he saw a creature—it looked like a rat—scurry across the floor from the window to the great mantelpiece of hard white marble.

If he had seen nothing more than this.

He saw in detail all that the first match had flashed at him. He saw his brother lying on the floor; a ghastly coincidence, his hand was caught round the edge of the work-table as hers had been. The other hand was clenched across his breast; there was a look of great agony on his face.

A dead face, of course. This was the end of the affair. He was lying dead by the window where the woman had sat every night at dusk and smiled at him.

The second match went out; the brother of the dead man struck a third. He looked again and closely. Then he staggered to his feet and gave a cry. It rang through the empty rooms and echoed without wearying down the long, stone passages in the basement.

Gilbert's head was thrown back; his chin peaked to the ceiling. On his throat were livid marks. The doctor saw them distinctly; he saw the grip of small fingers; the distinct impression of a woman's little hand.

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The curious thing about the whole story—the most curious thing, perhaps—is that no other eye ever saw those murderous marks. So, there was no scandal, no chase after the murderer, no undiscovered crime. They faded; when the doctor saw his brother again in the full light and in the presence of others his throat was clear. And the post mortem proved that death was due to natural causes.

So, the matter stands, and will.

But where the house and its overgrown garden stood runs a new road with neat red and white villas.

Whatever secret it knew—if any—it kept discreetly.

Ned Dent is morbid enough to go down the smart new road in the twilight sometimes and wonder.