

Victorian Secrets

The Ghost of Charlotte Cray by Florence Marryat

Mr. Sigismund Braggett was sitting in the little room he called his study, wrapped in a profound—not to say a mournful—reverie. Now, there was nothing in the present life nor surroundings of Mr. Braggett to account for such a demonstration. He was a publisher and bookseller; a man well to do, with a thriving business in the city, and the prettiest of all pretty villas at Streatham. And he was only just turned forty; had not a grey hair in his head nor a false tooth in his mouth; and had been married but three short months to one of the fairest and most affectionate specimens of English womanhood that ever transformed a bachelor's quarters into Paradise.

What more could Mr. Sigismund Braggett possibly want? Nothing! His trouble lay in the fact that he had got rather more than he wanted. Most of us have our little peccadilloes in this world—awkward reminiscences that we would like to bury five fathoms deep, and never hear mentioned again, but that have an uncomfortable habit of cropping up at the most inconvenient moments; and no mortal is more likely to be troubled with them than a middle-aged bachelor who has taken to matrimony.

Mr. Sigismund Braggett had no idea what he was going in for when he led the blushing Emily Primrose up to the altar, and swore to be hers, and hers only, until death should them part. He had no conception a woman's curiosity could be so keen, her tongue so long, and her inventive faculties so correct. He had spent whole days before the fatal moment of marriage in burning letters, erasing initials, destroying locks of hair, and making offerings of affection look as if he had purchased them with his own money. But it had been of little avail. Mrs. Braggett had swooped down upon him like a beautiful bird of prey, and wheedled, coaxed, or kissed him out of half his secrets before he knew what he was about. But he had never told her about Charlotte Cray. And now he almost wished that he had done so, for Charlotte Cray was the cause of his present dejected mood.

Now, there are ladies *and* ladies in this world. Some are very shy, and will only permit themselves to be wooed by stealth. Others, again, are the pursuers rather than the pursued, and chase the wounded or the flying even to the very doors of their stronghold, or lie in wait for them like an octopus, stretching out their tentacles on every side in search of victims.

And to the latter class Miss Charlotte Cray decidedly belonged. Not a person worth mourning over, you will naturally say. But, then, Mr. Sigismund Braggett had not behaved well to her. She was one of the 'peccadilloes.' She was an authoress—not an author, mind you, which term smacks more of the profession than the sex—but an 'authoress,' with lots of the 'ladylike' about the plots of her stories and the metre of her rhymes. They had come together in the sweet connection of publisher and writer—had met first in a dingy, dusty little office at the back of his house of business, and laid the foundation of their friendship with the average amount of chaffering and prevarication that usually attend such proceedings.

Mr. Braggett ran a risk in publishing Miss Cray's tales or verses, but he found her useful in so many other ways that he used occasionally to hold forth a sop to Cerberus in the shape of

publicity for the sake of keeping her in his employ. For Miss Charlotte Cray—who was as old as himself, and had arrived at the period of life when women are said to pray ‘Any, good Lord, any!’—was really a clever woman, and could turn her hand to most things required of her, or upon which she had set her mind; and she had most decidedly set her mind upon marrying Mr. Braggett, and he—to serve his own purposes—had permitted her to cherish the idea, and this was the Nemesis that was weighing him down in the study at the present moment. He had complimented Miss Cray, and given her presents, and taken her out a-pleasuring, all because she was useful to him, and did odd jobs that no one else would undertake, and for less than any one else would have accepted; and he had known the while that she was in love with him, and that she believed he was in love with her.

He had not thought much of it at the time. He had not then made up his mind to marry Emily Primrose, and considered that what pleased Miss Cray, and harmed no one else, was fair play for all sides. But he had come to see things differently now. He had been married three months and the first two weeks had been very bitter ones to him. Miss Cray had written him torrents of reproaches during that unhappy period, besides calling day after day at his office to deliver them in person. This and her threats had frightened him out of his life. He had lived in hourly terror lest the clerks should overhear what passed at their interviews, or that his wife should be made acquainted with them.

He had implored Miss Cray, both by word of mouth and letter, to cease her persecution of him; but all the reply he received was that he was a base and perjured man, and that she should continue to call at his office, and write to him through the penny post, until he had introduced her to his wife. For therein lay the height and depth of his offending. He had been afraid to bring Emily and Miss Cray together, and the latter resented the omission as an insult. It was bad enough to find that Sigismund Braggett, whose hair she wore next her heart, and whose photograph stood as in a shrine upon her bedroom mantelpiece, had married another woman, without giving her even the chance of a refusal, but it was worse still to come to the conclusion that he did not intend her to have a glimpse into the garden of Eden he had created for himself. Miss Cray was a lady of vivid imagination and strong aspirations. All was not lost in her ideas, although Mr. Braggett *had* proved false to the hopes he had raised. Wives did not live for ever; and the chances and changes of this life were so numerous, that stranger things had happened than that Mr. Braggett might think fit to make better use of the second opportunity afforded him than he had done of the first. But if she were not to continue even his friend, it was too hard. But the perjured publisher had continued resolute, notwithstanding all Miss Cray’s persecution, and now he had neither seen nor heard from her for a month; and, man-like, he was beginning to wonder what had become of her, and whether she had found anybody to console her for his untruth. Mr. Braggett did not wish to comfort Miss Cray himself; but he did not quite like the notion of her being comforted.

After all—so he soliloquised—he had been very cruel to her; for the poor thing was devoted to him. How her eyes used to sparkle and her cheek to flush when she entered his office, and how eagerly she would undertake any work for him, however disagreeable to perform! He knew well that she had expected to be Mrs. Braggett, and it must have been a terrible disappointment to her when he married Emily Primrose.

Why had he not asked her out to Violet Villa since? What harm could she do as a visitor there? particularly if he cautioned her first as to the peculiarity of Mrs. Braggett’s disposition, and the quickness with which her jealousy was excited. It was close upon Christmas-time, the period when all old friends meet together and patch up, if they cannot entirely forget, everything that has annoyed them in the past. Mr. Braggett pictured to himself the poor old maid sitting solitary in her small rooms at Hammersmith, no longer able to live in the

expectation of seeing his manly form at the wicket-gate, about to enter and cheer her solitude. The thought smote him as a two-edged sword, and he sat down at once and penned Miss Charlotte a note, in which he inquired after her health, and hoped that they should soon see her at Violet Villa.

He felt much better after this note was written and despatched. He came out of the little study and entered the cheerful drawing-room, and sat with his pretty wife by the light of the fire, telling her of the lonely lady to whom he had just proposed to introduce her.

‘An old friend of mine, Emily. A clever, agreeable woman, though rather eccentric. You will be polite to her, I know, for my sake.’

‘An *old* woman, is she?’ said Mrs. Braggett, elevating her eyebrows. ‘And what do you call “old,” Siggy, I should like to know?’

‘Twice as old as yourself, my dear—five-and-forty at the very least, and not personable-looking, even for that age. Yet I think you will find her a pleasant companion, and I am sure she will be enchanted with you.’

‘I don’t know that: clever women don’t like me, as a rule, though I don’t know why.’

‘They are jealous of your beauty, my darling; but Miss Cray is above such meanness, and will value you for your own sake.’

‘She’d better not let me catch her valuing me for *yours*,’ responded Mrs. Braggett, with a flash of the eye that made her husband ready to regret the dangerous experiment he was about to make of bringing together two women who had each, in her own way, a claim upon him, and each the will to maintain it.

So he dropped the subject of Miss Charlotte Cray, and took to admiring his wife’s complexion instead, so that the evening passed harmoniously, and both parties were satisfied. For two days Mr. Braggett received no answer from Miss Cray, which rather surprised him. He had quite expected that on the reception of his invitation she would rush down to his office and into his arms, behind the shelter of the ground-glass door that enclosed his chair of authority. For Miss Charlotte had been used on occasions to indulge in rapturous demonstrations of the sort, and the remembrance of Mrs. Braggett located in Violet Villa would have been no obstacle whatever to her. She believed she had a prior claim to Mr. Braggett. However, nothing of the kind happened, and the perjured publisher was becoming strongly imbued with the idea that he must go out to Hammersmith and see if he could not make his peace with her in person, particularly as he had several odd jobs for Christmas-tide, which no one could undertake so well as herself, when a letter with a black-edged border was put into his hand. He opened it mechanically, not knowing the writing; but its contents shocked him beyond measure.

HONoured SIR,—I am sorry to tell you that Miss Cray died at my house a week ago, and was buried yesterday. She spoke of you several times during her last illness, and if you would like to hear any further particulars, and will call on me at the old address, I shall be most happy to furnish you with them. —Yours respectfully,

MARY THOMPSON.

When Mr. Braggett read this news, you might have knocked him over with a feather. It is not always true that a living dog is better than a dead lion. Some people gain considerably in the estimation of their friends by leaving this world, and Miss Charlotte Cray was one of them. Her persecution had ceased for ever, and her amiable weaknesses were alone held in remembrance. Mr. Braggett felt a positive relief in the knowledge that his dead friend and his wife would

never now be brought in contact with each other; but at the same time he blamed himself more than was needful, perhaps, for not having seen nor communicated with Miss Cray for so long before her death. He came down to breakfast with a portentously grave face that morning, and imparted the sad intelligence to Mrs. Braggett with the air of an undertaker. Emily wondered, pitied, and sympathised, but the dead lady was no more to her than any other stranger; and she was surprised her husband looked so solemn over it all. Mr. Braggett, however, could not dismiss the subject easily from his mind. It haunted him during the business hours of the morning, and as soon as he could conveniently leave his office, he posted away to Hammersmith. The little house in which Miss Cray used to live looked just the same, both inside and outside: how strange it seemed that *she* should have flown away from it for ever! And here was her landlady, Mrs. Thompson, bobbing and curtsying to him in the same old black net cap with artificial flowers in it, and the same stuff gown she had worn since he first saw her, with her apron in her hand, it is true, ready to go to her eyes as soon as a reasonable opportunity occurred, but otherwise the same Mrs. Thompson as before. And yet she would never wait upon *her* again.

‘It was all so sudden, sir,’ she said, in answer to Mr. Braggett’s inquiries, ‘that there was no time to send for nobody.’

‘But Miss Cray had my address.’

‘Ah! perhaps so; but she was off her head, poor dear, and couldn’t think of nothing. But she remembered you, sir, to the last; for the very morning she died, she sprung up in bed and called out, “Sigismund! Sigismund!” as loud as ever she could, and she never spoke to anybody afterwards, not one word.’

‘She left no message for me?’

‘None, sir. I asked her the day before she went if I was to say nothing to you for her (knowing you was such friends), and all her answer was, “I wrote to him. He’s got my letter.” So I thought, perhaps, you had heard, sir.’

‘Not for some time past. It seems terribly sudden to me, not having heard even of her illness. Where is she buried?’

‘Close by in the churchyard, sir. My little girl will go with you and show you the place, if you’d like to see it.’

Mr. Braggett accepted her offer and left.

When he was standing by a heap of clods they called a grave, and had dismissed the child, he drew out Miss Cray’s last letter, which he carried in his pocket, and read it over.

‘You tell me that I am not to call at your office again, except on business’ (so it ran), ‘nor to send letters to your private address, lest it should come to the knowledge of your wife, and create unpleasantness between you; but I *shall* call, and I *shall* write, until I have seen Mrs. Braggett, and, if you don’t take care, I will introduce myself to her and tell her the reason you have been afraid to do so.’

This letter had made Mr. Braggett terribly angry at the time of reception. He had puffed and fumed, and cursed Miss Charlotte by all his gods for daring to threaten him. But he read it with different feelings now Miss Charlotte was down there, six feet beneath the ground he stood on, and he could feel only compassion for her frenzy, and resentment against himself for having excited it. As he travelled home from Hammersmith to Streatham, he was a very dejected publisher indeed.

He did not tell Mrs. Braggett the reason of his melancholy, but it affected him to that degree that he could not go to office on the following day, but stayed at home instead, to be petted and waited upon by his pretty wife, which treatment resulted in a complete cure. The next morning, therefore, he started for London as briskly as ever, and arrived at office before his

usual time. A clerk, deputed to receive all messages for his master, followed him behind the ground-glass doors, with a packet of letters.

‘Mr. Van Ower was here yesterday, sir. He will let you have the copy before the end of the week, and Messrs. Hanleys’ foreman called on particular business, and will look in to-day at eleven. And Mr. Ellis came to ask if there was any answer to his letter yet; and Miss Cray called, sir; and that’s all.’

‘Who did you say?’ cried Braggett.

‘Miss Cray, sir. She waited for you above an hour, but I told her I thought you couldn’t mean to come into town at all, so she went.’

‘Do you know what you’re talking about, Hewetson? You said *Miss Cray!*’

‘And I meant it, sir—Miss Charlotte Cray. Burns spoke to her as well as I.’

‘Good heavens!’ exclaimed Mr. Braggett, turning as white as a sheet. ‘Go at once and send Burns to me.’ Burns came.

‘Burns, who was the lady that called to see me yesterday?’

‘Miss Cray, sir. She had a very thick veil on, and she looked so pale that I asked her if she had been ill, and she said “Yes.” She sat in the office for over an hour, hoping you’d come in, but as you didn’t, she went away again.’

‘Did she lift her veil?’

‘Not whilst I spoke to her, sir.’

‘How do you know it was Miss Cray, then?’

The clerk stared. ‘Well, sir, we all know her pretty well by this time.’

‘Did you ask her name?’

‘No, sir; there was no need to do it.’

‘You’re mistaken, that’s all, both you and Hewetson. It couldn’t have been Miss Cray! I know for certain that she is—is—is—not in London at present. It must have been a stranger.’

‘It was not, indeed, sir, begging your pardon. I could tell Miss Cray anywhere, by her figure and her voice, without seeing her face. But I *did* see her face, and remarked how awfully pale she was—just like death, sir!’

‘There! there! that will do! It’s of no consequence, and you can go back to your work.’

But any one who had seen Mr. Braggett, when left alone in his office, would not have said he

thought the matter of no consequence. The perspiration broke out upon his forehead, although it was December, and he rocked himself backward and forward in his chair with agitation.

At last he rose hurriedly, upset his throne, and dashed through the outer premises in the face of twenty people waiting to speak to him. As soon as he could find his voice, he hailed a hansom, and drove to Hammersmith. Good Mrs. Thompson opening the door to him, thought he looked as if he had just come out of a fever.

‘Lor’ bless me, sir! whatever’s the matter?’

‘Mrs. Thompson, have you told me the truth about Miss Cray? Is she really dead?’

‘*Really dead*, sir! Why, I closed her eyes, and put her in the coffin with my own hands! If she ain’t dead, I don’t know who is! But if you doubt my word, you’d better ask the doctor that gave the certificate for her.’

‘What is the doctor’s name?’

‘Dodson; he lives opposite.’

‘You must forgive my strange questions, Mrs. Thompson, but I have had a terrible dream about my poor friend, and I think I should like to talk to the doctor about her.’

‘Oh, very good, sir,’ cried the landlady, much offended. ‘I’m not afraid of what the doctor

will tell you. She had excellent nursing and everything as she could desire, and there's nothing on my conscience on that score, so I'll wish you good morning.' And with that Mrs. Thompson slammed the door in Mr. Braggett's face.

He found Dr Dodson at home.

'If I understand you rightly,' said the practitioner, looking rather steadfastly in the scared face of his visitor, 'you wish, as a friend of the late Miss Cray's, to see a copy of the certificate of her death? Very good, sir; here it is. She died, as you will perceive, on the twenty-fifth of November, of peritonitis. She had, I can assure you, every attention and care, but nothing could have saved her.'

'You are quite sure, then, she is dead?' demanded Mr. Braggett, in a vague manner.

The doctor looked at him as if he were not quite sure if he were sane.

'If seeing a patient die, and her corpse confined and buried, is being sure she is dead, I am in no doubt whatever about Miss Cray.'

'It is very strange—most strange and unaccountable,' murmured poor Mr. Braggett, in reply, as he shuffled out of the doctor's passage, and took his way back to the office.

Here, however, after an interval of rest and a strong brandy and soda, he managed to pull himself together, and to come to the conclusion that the doctor and Mrs. Thompson *could* not be mistaken, and that, consequently, the clerks must. He did not mention the subject again to them, however; and as the days went on, and nothing more was heard of the mysterious stranger's visit, Mr. Braggett put it altogether out of his mind.

At the end of a fortnight, however, when he was thinking of something totally different, young Hewetson remarked to him, carelessly,— 'Miss Cray was here again yesterday, sir. She walked in just as your cab had left the door.'

All the horror of his first suspicions returned with double force upon the unhappy man's mind.

'Don't talk nonsense!' he gasped, angrily, as soon as he could speak. 'Don't attempt to play any of your tricks on me, young man, or it will be the worse for you, I can tell you.'

'Tricks, sir!' stammered the clerk. 'I don't know what you are alluding to. I am only telling you the truth. You have always desired me to be most particular in letting you know the names of the people who call in your absence, and I thought I was only doing my duty in making a point of ascertaining them—'

'Yes, yes! Hewetson, of course,' replied Mr. Braggett, passing his handkerchief over his brow, 'and you are quite right in following my directions as closely as possible; only—in this case you are completely mistaken, and it is the second time you have committed the error.'

'Mistaken!'

'Yes!—as mistaken as it is possible for a man to be! Miss Cray *could* not have called at this office yesterday.'

'But she did, sir.'

'Am I labouring under some horrible nightmare?' exclaimed the publisher, 'or are we playing at cross purposes? Can you mean the Miss Cray I mean?'

'I am speaking of Miss Charlotte Cray, sir, the author of "Sweet Gwendoline,"—the lady who has undertaken so much of our compilation the last two years, and who has a long nose, and wears her hair in curls. I never knew there was another Miss Cray; but if there are two, that is the one I mean.'

'Still I *cannot* believe it, Hewetson, for the Miss Cray who has been associated with our firm died on the twenty-fifth of last month.'

'*Died*, sir! Is Miss Cray dead? Oh, it can't be! It's some humbugging trick that's been played

upon you, for I'd swear she was in this room yesterday afternoon, as full of life as she's ever been since I knew her. She didn't talk much, it's true, for she seemed in a hurry to be off again, but she had got on the same dress and bonnet she was in here last, and she made herself as much at home in the office as she ever did. Besides,' continued Hewetson, as though suddenly remembering something, 'she left a note for you, sir.'

'A note! Why did you not say so before?'

'It slipped my memory when you began to doubt my word in that way, sir. But you'll find it in the bronze vase. She told me to tell you she had placed it there.'

Mr. Braggett made a dash at the vase, and found the three-cornered note as he had been told.

Yes! it was Charlotte's handwriting, or the facsimile of it, there was no doubt of that; and his hands shook so he could hardly open the paper. It contained these words:

'You tell me that I am not to call at your office again, except on business, nor to send letters to your private address, lest it should come to the knowledge of your wife, and create unpleasantness between you; but I *shall* call, and I *shall* write until I have seen Mrs. Braggett, and if you don't take care I will introduce myself to her, and tell her the reason you have been afraid to do so.'

Precisely the same words, in the same writing of the letter he still carried in his breast-pocket, and which no mortal eyes but his and hers had ever seen. As the unhappy man sat gazing at the opened note, his whole body shook as if he were attacked by ague.

'It is Miss Cray's handwriting, isn't it, sir?'

'It looks like it, Hewetson, but it cannot be. I tell you it is an impossibility! Miss Cray died last month, and I have seen not only her grave, but the doctor and nurse who attended her in her last illness. It is folly, then, to suppose either that she called here or wrote that letter.'

'Then *who could it have* been, sir?' said Hewetson, attacked with a sudden terror in his turn.

'That is impossible for me to say; but should the lady call again, you had better ask her boldly for her name and address.'

'I'd rather you'd depute the office to anybody but me, sir,' replied the clerk, as he hastily backed out of the room.

Mr. Braggett, dying with suspense and conjecture, went through his business as best he could, and hurried home to Violet Villa.

There he found that his wife had been spending the day with a friend, and only entered the house a few minutes before himself.

'Siggy, dear!' she commenced, as soon as he joined her in the drawing-room after dinner; 'I really think we should have the fastenings and bolts of this house looked to. Such a funny thing happened whilst I was out this afternoon. Ellen has just been telling me about it.'

'What sort of a thing, dear?'

'Well, I left home as early as twelve, you know, and told the servants I shouldn't be back until dinner-time; so they were all enjoying themselves in the kitchen, I suppose, when cook told Ellen she heard a footstep in the drawing-room. Ellen thought at first it must be cook's fancy, because she was sure the front door was fastened; but when they listened, they all heard the noise together, so she ran upstairs, and what on earth do you think she saw?'

'How can I guess, my dear?'

'Why, a lady, seated in this very room, as if she was waiting for somebody. She was oldish, Ellen says, and had a very white face, with long curls hanging down each side of it; and she wore a blue bonnet with white feathers, and a long black cloak, and—'

'Emily, Emily! Stop! You don't know what you're talking about. That girl is a fool; you must

send her away. That is, how could the lady have got in if the door was closed? Good heavens! you'll all drive me mad between you with your folly!' exclaimed Mr. Braggett, as he threw himself back in his chair, with an exclamation that sounded very like a groan.

Pretty Mrs. Braggett was offended. What had she said or done that her husband should doubt her word? She tossed her head in indignation, and remained silent. If Mr. Braggett wanted any further information, he would have to apologise.

'Forgive me, darling,' he said, after a long pause. 'I don't think I'm very well this evening, but your story seemed to upset me.'

'I don't see why it should upset you,' returned Mrs. Braggett. 'If strangers are allowed to come prowling about the house in this way, we shall be robbed some day, and then you'll say I should have told you of it.'

'Wouldn't she—this person—give her name?'

'Oh! I'd rather say no more about it. You had better ask Ellen.'

'No, Emily! I'd rather hear it from you.'

'Well, don't interrupt me again, then. When Ellen saw the woman seated here, she asked her her name and business at once, but she gave no answer, and only sat and stared at her. And so Ellen, feeling very uncomfortable, had just turned round to call up cook, when the woman got up, and dashed past her like a flash of lightning, and they saw nothing more of her!'

'Which way did she leave the house?'

'Nobody knows any more than how she came in. The servants declare the hall-door was neither opened nor shut—but, of course, it must have been. She was a tall gaunt woman, Ellen says, about fifty, and she's sure her hair was dyed. She must have come to steal something, and that's why I say we ought to have the house made more secure. Why, Siggy! Siggy! what's the matter? Here, Ellen! Jane! come, quick, some of you! Your master's fainted!'

And, sure enough, the repeated shocks and horrors of the day had had such an effect upon poor Mr. Braggett, that for a moment he did lose all consciousness of what surrounded him. He was thankful to take advantage of the Christmas holidays, to run over to Paris with his wife, and try to forget, in the many marvels of that city, the awful fear that fastened upon him at the mention of anything connected with home. He might be enjoying himself to the top of his bent; but directly the remembrance of Charlotte Cray crossed his mind, all sense of enjoyment vanished, and he trembled at the mere thought of returning to his business, as a child does when sent to bed in the dark.

He tried to hide the state of his feelings from Mrs. Braggett, but she was too sharp for him. The simple, blushing Emily Primrose had developed, under the influence of the matrimonial forcing-frame, into a good watch-dog, and nothing escaped her notice.

Left to her own conjecture, she attributed his frequent moods of dejection to the existence of some other woman, and became jealous accordingly. If Siggy did not love her, why had he married her? She felt certain there was some other horrid creature who had engaged his affections and would not leave him alone, even now that he was her own lawful property. And to find out who the 'horrid creature' was became Mrs. Emily's constant idea. When she had found out, she meant to give her a piece of her mind, never fear! Meanwhile Mr. Braggett's evident distaste to returning to business only served to increase his wife's suspicions. A clear conscience, she argued, would know no fear. So they were not a happy couple, as they set their faces once more towards England. Mr. Braggett's dread of re-entering his office amounted almost to terror, and Mrs. Braggett, putting this and that together, resolved that she would fathom the mystery, if it lay in feminine *finesse* to do so. She did not whisper a word of her intentions to dear Siggy, you may be sure of that! She worked after the manner of her amiable sex, like a cat in the dark, or a worm boring through the earth, and appearing on the surface

when least expected.

So poor Mr. Braggett brought her home again, heavy at heart indeed, but quite ignorant that any designs were being made against him. I think he would have given a thousand pounds to be spared the duty of attending office the day after his arrival. But it was necessary, and he went, like a publisher and a Briton. But Mrs. Emily had noted his trepidation and his fears, and laid her plans accordingly. She had never been asked to enter those mysterious precincts, the house of business. Mr. Braggett had not thought it necessary that her blooming loveliness should be made acquainted with its dingy, dusty accessories, but she meant to see them for herself to-day. So she waited till he had left Violet Villa ten minutes, and then she dressed and followed him by the next train to London.

Mr. Sigismund Braggett meanwhile had gone on his way, as people go to a dentist, determined to do what was right, but with an indefinite sort of idea that he might never come out of it alive.

He dreaded to hear what might have happened in his absence, and he delayed his arrival at the office for half-an-hour, by walking there instead of taking a cab as usual, in order to put off the evil moment. As he entered the place, however, he saw at a glance that his efforts were vain, and that something had occurred. The customary formality and precision of the office were upset, and the clerks, instead of bending over their ledgers, or attending to the demands of business, were all huddled together at one end whispering and gesticulating to each other. But as soon as the publisher appeared, a dead silence fell upon the group, and they only stared at him with an air of horrid mystery.

‘What is the matter now?’ he demanded, angrily, for like most men when in a fright which they are ashamed to exhibit, Mr. Sigismund Braggett tried to cover his want of courage by bounce.

The young man called Hewetson advanced towards him, with a face the colour of ashes, and pointed towards the ground-glass doors dumbly.

‘What do you mean? Can’t you speak? What’s come to the lot of you, that you are neglecting my business in this fashion to make fools of yourselves?’

‘If you please, sir, she’s in there.’

Mr. Braggett started back as if he’d been shot. But still he tried to have it out.

‘*She!* Who’s *she?*’

‘Miss Cray, sir.’

‘Haven’t I told you already that’s a lie.’

‘Will you judge for yourself, Mr. Braggett?’ said a grey-haired man, stepping forward. ‘I was on the stairs myself just now when Miss Cray passed me, and I have no doubt whatever but that you will find her in your private room, however much the reports that have lately reached you may seem against the probability of such a thing.’

Mr. Braggett’s teeth chattered in his head as he advanced to the ground-glass doors, through the panes of one of which there was a little peephole to ascertain if the room were occupied or not.

He stooped and looked in. At the table, with her back towards him, was seated the well-known figure of Charlotte Cray. He recognised at once the long black mantle in which she was wont to drape her gaunt figure—the blue bonnet, with its dejected-looking, uncurled feather—the lank curls which rested on her shoulders—and the black-leather bag, with a steel clasp, which she always carried in her hand. It was the embodiment of Charlotte Cray, he had no doubt of that; but how could he reconcile the fact of her being there with the damp clods he had seen piled upon her grave, with the certificate of death, and the doctor’s and landlady’s assertion that they had watched her last moments?

At last he prepared, with desperate energy, to turn the handle of the door. At that moment the attention of the more frivolous of the clerks was directed from his actions by the entrance of an uncommonly pretty woman at the other end of the outer office. Such a lovely creature as this seldom brightened the gloom of their dusty abiding-place. Lilies, roses, and carnations vied with each other in her complexion, whilst the sunniest of locks, and the brightest of blue eyes, lent her face a girlish charm not easily described. What could this fashionably-attired Venus want in their house of business?

‘Is Mr. Braggett here? I am Mrs. Braggett. Please show me in to him immediately.’

They glanced at the ground-glass doors of the inner office. They had already closed behind the manly form of their employer.

‘This way, madam,’ one said, deferentially, as he escorted her to the presence of Mr. Braggett.

Meanwhile, Sigismund had opened the portals of the Temple of Mystery, and with trembling knees entered it. The figure in the chair did not stir at his approach. He stood at the door irresolute. What should he do or say?

‘Charlotte,’ he whispered.

Still she did not move.

At that moment his wife entered.

‘Oh, Sigismund!’ cried Mrs. Emily, reproachfully, ‘I knew you were keeping something from me, and now I’ve caught you in the very act. Who is this lady, and what is her name? I shall refuse to leave the room until I know it.’

At the sound of her rival’s voice, the woman in the chair rose quickly to her feet and confronted them. Yes! there was Charlotte Cray, precisely similar to what she had appeared in life, only with an uncertainty and vagueness about the lines of the familiar features that made them ghastly.

She stood there, looking Mrs. Emily full in the face, but only for a moment, for, even as she gazed, the lineaments grew less and less distinct, with the shape of the figure that supported them, until, with a crash, the apparition seemed to fall in and disappear, and the place that had known her was filled with empty air.

‘Where is she gone?’ exclaimed Mrs. Braggett, in a tone of utter amazement.

‘Where is *who* gone?’ repeated Mr. Braggett, hardly able to articulate from fear.

‘The lady in the chair!’

‘There was no one there except in your own imagination. It was my great-coat that you mistook for a figure,’ returned her husband hastily, as he threw the article in question over the back of the arm-chair.

‘But how could that have been?’ said his pretty wife, rubbing her eyes. ‘How could I think a coat had eyes, and hair, and features? I am *sure* I saw a woman seated there, and that she rose and stared at me. Siggy! tell me it was true. It seems so incomprehensible that I should have been mistaken.’

‘You must question your own sense. You see that the room is empty now, except for ourselves, and you know that no one has left it. If you like to search under the table, you can.’

‘Ah! now, Siggy, you are laughing at me, because you know that would be folly. But there was certainly some one here—only, where can she have disappeared to?’

‘Suppose we discuss the matter at a more convenient season,’ replied Mr. Braggett, as he drew his wife’s arm through his arm. ‘Hewetson! you will be able to tell Mr. Hume that he was mistaken. Say, also, that I shall not be back in the office to-day. I am not so strong as I thought I was, and feel quite unequal to business. Tell him to come out to Streatham this evening with my letters, and I will talk with him there.’

What passed at that interview was never disclosed; but pretty Mrs. Braggett was much rejoiced, a short time afterwards, by her husband telling her that he had resolved to resign his active share of the business, and devote the rest of his life to her and Violet Villa. He would have no more occasion, therefore, to visit the office, and be exposed to the temptation of spending four or five hours out of every twelve away from her side. For, though Mrs. Emily had arrived at the conclusion that the momentary glimpse she caught of a lady in Siggy's office must have been a delusion, she was not quite satisfied by his assertions that she would never have found a more tangible cause for her jealousy.

But Sigismund Braggett knew more than he chose to tell Mrs. Emily. He knew that what she had witnessed was no delusion, but a reality; and that Charlotte Cray had carried out her dying determination to call at his office and his private residence, *until she had seen his wife!*



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