

BY FRANCES PITT.

ILLUSTRATED BY L. R. BRIGHTWELL.

I VENTURE to send you a few brief observations upon this curious subject, supported by bold experience. The commonest of country-house ghosts, in my belief, is the white, or, as it is more commonly called, the barn owl. This

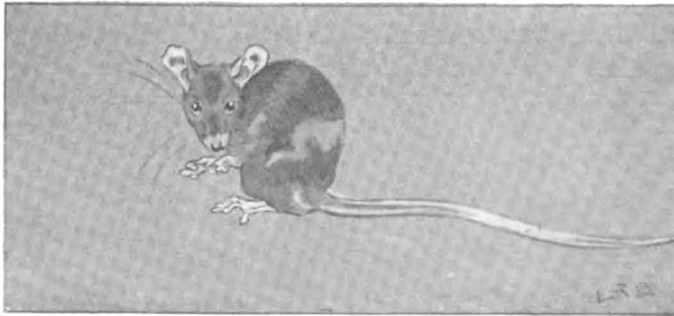
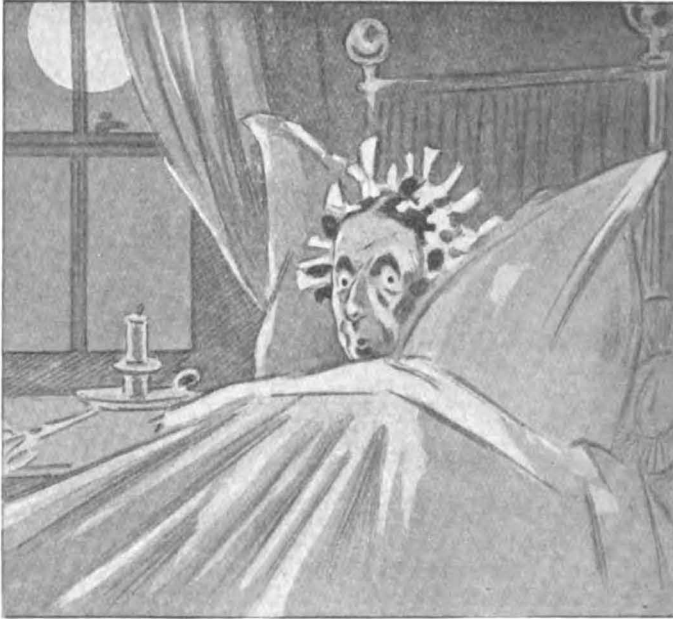
bird generally roosts in buildings, but does not mind whether its home is in the church tower, the barn, a loft, or some disused room in an old house to which it can gain access by a broken pane in the window or a hole under the roof. Here it will live together



"At night, when all is quiet, they come out, and dance up and down their passages."

with its mate for many happy days, catching many a mouse and young rat from the scores that have their homes within the walls. Each night the owls go out and fly about on noiseless wing, floating like white shadows round the gardens, buildings and ricks, and

not be a nuisance. The key creaks and groans in the rusty lock ; the owl, which was sleeping peacefully with closed eyes and feathers fluffed out, hears the noise and looks up, its feathers are pulled tight into its body, and it opens its great black eyes to



An "Effect" and its "Cause."

accounting for more mice than two or three cats.

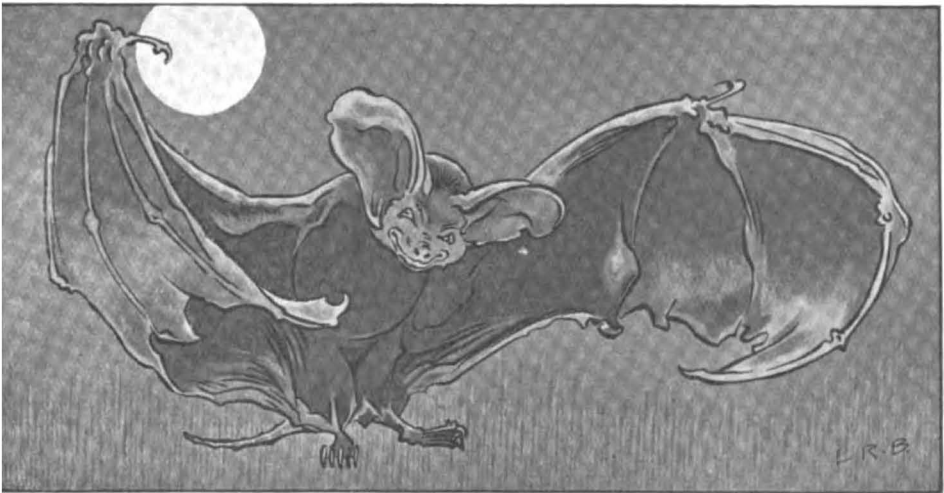
Perhaps the owls have lived this harmless life for some time, but one day somebody will wish to go into the old room. Probably it will be the servants come to put some furniture that is not wanted away where it will

their widest extent. The door moves stiffly on its hinges, and light from the landing window streams into the dusk of the shuttered, cobwebby room. A woman advances, but she does not see the bird in the corner. However, the owl sees her, and, angry and frightened, it utters a piercing, screaming hiss—a

sound that seems to shiver down one's backbone. Appalled and bewildered she stands her ground for a moment, but a white "something" in a corner, that describes circles in the air, and again utters the alarming noise, shatters her remaining nerve, and she turns and flees, banging the door behind her. The housemaid does not know it was only the owl moving its head round in circles, and uttering its peculiar and penetrating cry. Instead, she will tell a wonderful tale of a woman sitting in the corner of the room dressed in white and calling aloud! In short, the house will now be haunted!

does not move with a very light step, and at night sounds seem to gain in volume. The result is more ghosts. Should the rats chance to have a battle in one of their numerous passages, the squeaks, scuffings, bitings and the bumping will provide anyone of an imaginative turn with sufficient material for a dozen stories.

A very common thing is to be told that something invisible rushes past making a wave of air, and when you first experience this sensation in the dark it is most strange, not to say alarming. But a little investigation will discover a poor bat that has got



"Pleasant Dreams."

Next to the barn owl as a source of ghost stories comes the common brown rat; indeed, I am not certain I ought not to rank it first, for it is a very fruitful subject. There are rats in nearly all houses that can boast of having attained to some age, and they are accomplished engineers, driving their tunnels through the walls, and having secret paths between the floors. At night, when all is quiet, they come out and race about, or dance up and down their passages. Nervous people awake in the dark, hear footsteps in their rooms, or something running outside their door. And they have not imagined it either, for a rat in a hurry

in through an open window when chasing an insect, and is now dashing around frantic in its endeavours to get away again. To country people of the labouring class this cause is as bad as anything they could imagine, for they hold the "flitter-mouse" in abhorrence, and consider the entrance of one of the poor little harmless creatures as an omen of ill-luck.

Out in the gardens it is the tawny, brown, or wood owl which—next to the mischievous boy—is oftenest the origin of blood-curdling stories. An example of what they have been known to do is the case of the old lady who was driving home one fine spring

evening in her open carriage, and, as it turned in at the lodge gates under huge oaks, something without sound or warning of any sort gave her a blow on the head and knocked off her bonnet, together with sundry pieces of hair; but perhaps the latter were not too firmly attached to the lady's head. Needless to say she was considerably startled and upset. Two or three days later she was again returning at about

the cock bird roosted close at hand. He it was who had been guilty of the attacks, which shows he must have been a bird of exceptional force of character, for it is rare indeed for these owls to attack anybody, even when visiting their nests.

I must say in conclusion that the ordinary house-mouse can make some curious little noises when heard scampering about in the dead of night, and



"His hat was knocked off."

the same hour, and at the identical spot, under the gloomy oak trees, she saw something dark fall on her coachman's head. His hat was knocked off, and the startled horse half-bolted up the drive. Subsequent investigation discovered an owl's nest in the hollow trunk of one of the big trees. There were three little white-grey babies resting on the rotten wood, over whom their mother was keeping guard, while

must also remark that the average country-house ghost can be generally traced to one of the creatures I have mentioned, though, of course, there are others which may be blamed as well; but the word "blame" should really be attached to nervous people who are ready to believe weird tales without sufficient investigation of the cause of the alarming sights and sounds.