



THE BLACK SPECTRE

BY
W. E. NORRIS.

ILLUSTRATED BY A. H. BUCKLAND.

NOT for everybody would that busy and distinguished physician Sir Julian Ellis have consented to dine and sleep in a secluded country house some forty miles away from London, but occasional concessions had to be made to Thiselton, because Thiselton was invaluable as a *brocanteur*, and because Sir Julian, in addition to being busy and a physician, was a collector of old silver. Now it is quite possible to collect old silver and be a fairly good judge of it, yet to be disastrously taken in from time to time; so Thiselton, who was never taken in, had undeniable claims upon the gratitude of his friends and clients. It was on a misty evening in November that the broad-shouldered, rosy-cheeked man bustled out to the front door of the old Manor House at Calham, attracted thither by the hoot of Sir Julian's approaching motor.

"Delighted to see you, Ellis!" he

cried heartily. "Come in out of the cold, and tell me what you think of my ancient dwelling."

"Thirteenth century," remarked Sir Julian, after a rapid survey of the low ceiling, ponderous beams and huge fireplace of the entrance hall into which he was conducted. "Yes, very nice, very picturesque, very charming. But don't you find it a little lonely and inaccessible?"

"Just why I've taken a lease of it," chuckled Mr. Thiselton, standing with his back to the blazing logs. "You see, I'm bound to be somewhere within reasonable distance of London, and having, as I constantly have, things worth a king's ransom in my possession, I'm no less bound to fight shy of the suburbs. You wouldn't think burglars would stick at breaking into a haunted house; but it seems they do, and although Calham Manor has had an extraordinarily large number of tenants not one of them has ever been robbed."

"Oh, you're haunted, are you?"

"So I'm assured. You'll be all right, though; there's only one haunted room. I sleep in it myself, and haven't been disturbed up to now. It's true that I'm a pretty sound sleeper. Whether I've been preserved by that or by my scepticism I'm sure I don't know and don't care. The only trouble has been with the servants, who are always giving me notice. Of course,

there are noises at night in an old house like this, so they get scared. However, my present butler, I'm glad to say, is a stolid, sensible sort of fellow, and he tells me he has no more belief in the Black Spectre, as they call it, than I have."

So slight was Mr. Thiselton's faith in the alleged apparition that he had not even taken the trouble to inform himself as to its history and habits. "Oh, I couldn't tell you," said he, in answer to inquiries. "Most likely somebody was murdered in that room once upon a time. He or his murderer may have been a black man, perhaps. Anyhow, the house has a black reputation—for which I'm grateful."

The subject was dropped. It did not specially interest Sir Julian, who was not superstitious and who preferred to talk about Caroline rose-water dishes. He spent a pleasant enough evening, and was given a really excellent dinner, served in a spacious oak-panelled dining-room. Two neighbours, Chilcott and Jennings by name, shared his host's hospitality—jovial bachelors, appreciative of good cheer, destitute of artistic perceptions, evidently invited because they were neighbours, and for no other reason. Mr. Chilcott was intermittently facetious with reference to the spectre, did not himself believe in "that sort of rot," yet appeared to be a trifle piqued by the robust incredulity of the new tenant, who had outdone all his predecessors by actually occupying the ghost chamber.

"Just you wait a bit, my boy," said he. "Calham will hear of your jumping out of your window in a cold sweat, with your hair standing on end, one of these fine nights."

"Much more likely to hear of your being chucked out of it," returned Thiselton good-humouredly. "I always sleep with my window open, as I've told you before, so you can get yourself up as a bogey and climb in, if you have the pluck. Why don't you?"

Mr. Chilcott, it seemed, enjoyed some local renown as a practical joker. He was unlikely, however, to add to his laurels at Mr. Thiselton's expense.

"The fact is," the latter told Sir Julian, after the two guests had departed, "that neither he nor Jennings nor anybody else hereabouts would stop under this roof after midnight for a hundred pounds. In a blue funk, the whole lot of 'em, if you'll believe me! Well, that's all to the good. We're as safe as if we had a double cordon of police round the house."

To be provided with some substitute for police protection was, as has already been mentioned, of prime importance to Mr. Thiselton. Secure under the spectral ægis he might be, but he was too careful a man to neglect subsidiary precautions. No sooner, therefore, had he escorted Sir Julian to a warm and comfortably furnished bedroom than he proceeded to gather up such valuables as could be transferred to his own—rings, seals, miniatures, a priceless snuff-box, set in brilliants, once the property of Peter the Great, and so forth.

"You can put out the lights, Vinney," he said to the butler, as he mounted the creaking staircase.

"Very good, sir," answered the man, and added, in a deprecating voice: "Beg pardon, sir, but I'm sorry to say I can't remain in your service."

"Confound it!" exclaimed Mr. Thiselton irritably. "Have *you* been hearing weird noises now, or what is it? I thought you didn't mind noises."

"It isn't what I've heard, sir," the butler replied, "it's what I've seen—and that three times, as plainly as I see you now, sir. An awful great black figure, with its face covered, stooping over your bed, sir, and somehow it seemed to me as if—as if it meant death, sir!"

"What an infernal ass you are, Vinney!"

"I may be that, sir," Vinney acknowledged meekly enough; "but what I saw I saw, and I'm not a fanciful man, nor yet what you could call timid when it comes to dealing with flesh and blood."

He certainly did not convey the impression of being either. He was a well-knit, muscular little fellow of thirty or thereabouts, and was ordinarily



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cheerful and intelligent of aspect. Just now, however, he was visibly the victim of nervous shock. With quivering lips he owned as much. He was very sorry; he had not said a word to the other servants, nor would he do so, but he could bear it no longer, and he should wish to leave the next morning, if Mr. Thiselton pleased.

Mr. Thiselton did not please at all. He said he had never heard of such a thing in his life. What was he to do without a man-servant, pray? No; since Vinney was a cowardly idiot he could give a month's warning, but he was not to relinquish his duties until somebody had been found to replace him.

To this Vinney rejoined that he would willingly pay his master a month's wages in lieu of notice, only go he must. For three nights he had been unable to get a wink of sleep. "And, to speak plainly, sir, it's as much as I can bring myself to do to stop another hour in this accursed house. For accursed it is, sir, you may depend, and I only wish I could persuade you not to sleep in that room again. I've got it sort of borne in upon me that there's trouble coming this very night."

It was as impossible to doubt the man's sincerity as it was obviously vain to reason with or rate him.

"Oh, you be hanged!" exclaimed Mr. Thiselton impatiently, and turned away, shrugging his shoulders.

He locked and bolted his door, as usual, undressed quickly, placed the snuff-box and some other articles of value under his pillow, deposited a loaded revolver upon the table by his bedside, and set himself to court the slumber which in his case seldom required long wooing. Of course, Vinney's childish yarn had not alarmed him; anything may be seen by a fool in the requisite hysterical condition. Yet he had to recognise, to his annoyance, that he did not feel altogether at ease. Seen in the half-light of a dying fire, the ancient four-poster—so suggestive of a hearse—upon which he lay, the black oak of the walls, the dilapidated, worm-eaten furniture, had a grim and sinister air. A gust of wind

blew in the blind from the open window and let it fall again with a rattle. From the distance came the melancholy call of an owl. Well, it was an eerie place, and there is such a thing as eeriness, though there are assuredly no such things as spectres. Mr. Thiselton found himself shivering slightly beneath his blankets. However, he closed his eyes resolutely, dismissed uncanny imaginings, and began to think of the five or six thousand pounds which he expected to get out of an American millionaire for a snuff-box which had cost him a couple of hundred. This had the desired soothing effect, and after a time he sank gently into profound oblivion.

It was (as subsequently appeared) soon after two o'clock in the morning that he awoke with a start and with the sense of having been shaken by somebody. The fire had gone out, but there was a faint glimmer of moonlight in the room, rendering clearly discernible at the foot of the bed a veiled black shape, silent, motionless, menacing. It must be confessed that for one moment Mr. Thiselton's blood ran cold. Only for one moment, though. A burglar, not a ghost, was what he instinctively dreaded, and by instinct his hand darted forth to grip his revolver.

"Hullo, you!" he called out. "What the devil are you up to here?"

The black-shrouded form neither moved nor spoke, but a draught of air slightly stirred its drapery, thus proving it to be at all events no phantom.

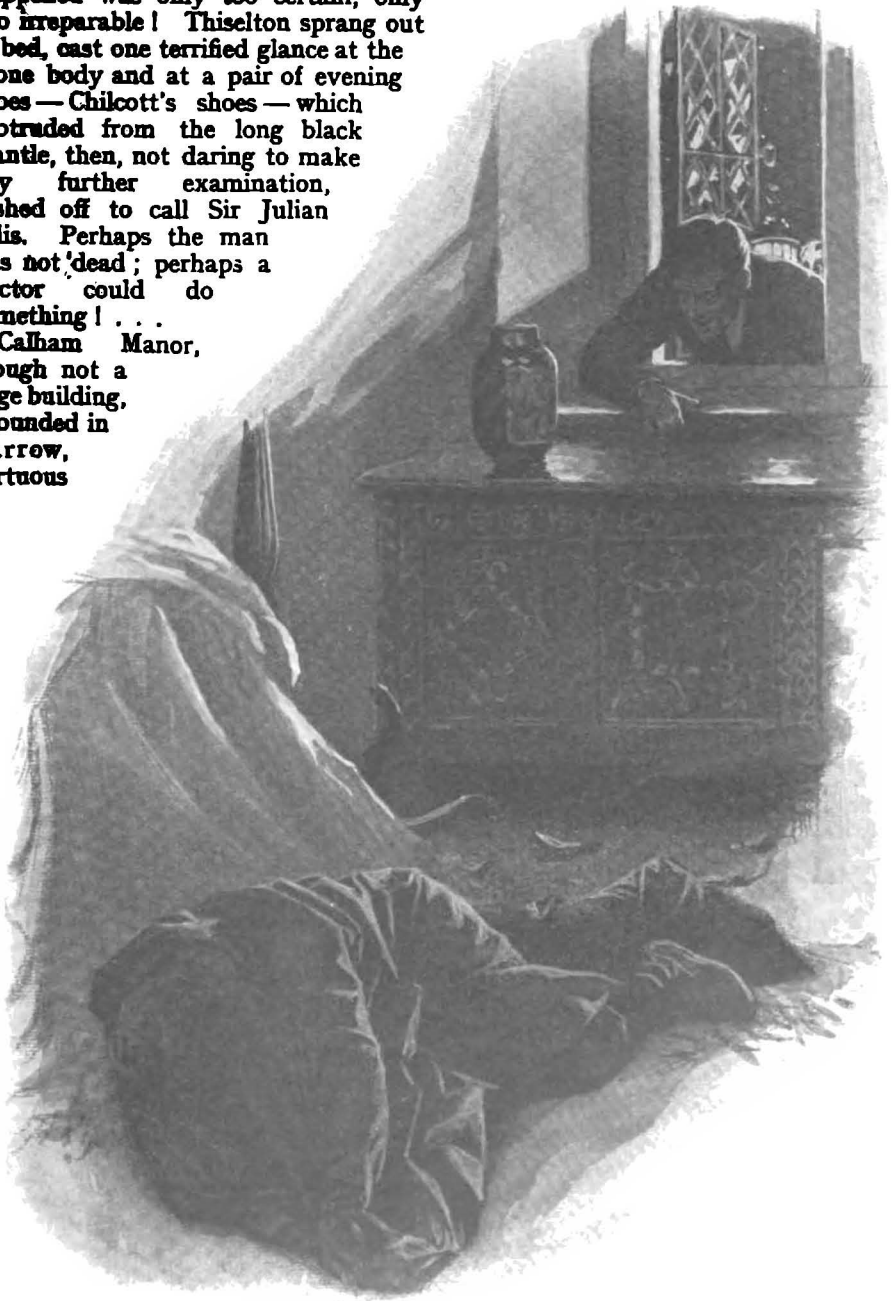
"Answer me," Mr. Thiselton commanded, "or I'll put a bullet into you!"

No answer came, and—Mr. Thiselton promptly fired. The figure swayed; then, without a word or a groan, lurched forward and crashed heavily to the ground.

Now it was that Mr. Thiselton, realising in a swift flash of dismay what he had done, became frightened indeed. Burglars do not masquerade as ghosts; the last thing a burglar would do would be to arouse a sleeping man. That silly fellow Chilcott, with his practical jokes! . . . What had

happened was only too certain, only too irreparable ! Thiselton sprang out of bed, cast one terrified glance at the prone body and at a pair of evening shoes — Chilcott's shoes — which protruded from the long black mantle, then, not daring to make any further examination, rushed off to call Sir Julian Ellis. Perhaps the man was not dead ; perhaps a doctor could do something ! . . .

Calham Manor, though not a large building, abounded in narrow, tortuous



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passages, broken here and there by unexpected flights of steps, and the fugitive had omitted in his haste to

provide himself with a light. He had been blundering and stumbling about for some minutes, when Sir Julian,

carrying a bedroom candle, emerged from the darkness and asked :

"Is that you, Thistelton? Anything wrong? I thought I heard a shot fired."

"Good God, Ellis!" gasped out the other, "I'm afraid I've killed Chilcott! I was only half awake—it was all over in a moment. His own fault, poor fellow! I don't say so to excuse myself, but it *was* his own fault, you know."

Sir Julian, knowing nothing, except that his host was too agitated to be questioned, murmured, "Quite so—quite so!" in the reassuring voice advocated by the faculty, and added, "Matters may not be as bad as you think. Let me see your unfortunate friend, anyhow."

"That's what I want you to do," returned Thistelton breathlessly. "Come along!"

With hurried steps he led the way to his bedroom door, which he had left open, but which was now, to his amazement, shut. Not only was it shut, but it was firmly locked, and, as he well knew, nothing short of a battering ram would have been needed to force that solid mass of timber. He beat upon it with his fist, eliciting no response from within, and then turned in bewilderment to his neighbour, who remarked with a smile :

"This doesn't look much as if there was a dead man inside."

"No, it doesn't," Thistelton assented. "It looks as if he had got out of the window—the way he must have come in. Heaven grant he has! All the same, I'll swear he's got a bullet in his body."

Sir Julian, on being informed of what had, or was supposed to have, taken place, opined that the nocturnal joker had escaped injury. "Naturally, he dropped when you fired; it was the only safe thing for him to do under the circumstances. But it doesn't follow that he was hit, and it's certain that he can't have been killed, so you may set your mind at ease as to that. Now what about taking a leaf out of his book and regaining your bedroom through the window? Probably he

has had the decency to leave his ladder behind him."

But he had not been so considerate; nor, strange to say, were there any traces of footprints on the flower-bed beneath Mr. Thistelton's open window. The two men, who had let themselves out into the misty moonlight, stared at one another in perplexity. What was to be done? Evidently a ladder must be procured from somewhere; but this proved a longer job than had been anticipated, for when a somnolent gardener had been aroused (it would be useless to call upon the chicken-hearted Vinney, Thistelton said) the ladder which ought to have been in one of the outhouses was missing, and a good half-hour elapsed before it was discovered, lying in a clump of shrubs near the house. At length access was obtained to the haunted chamber, where the lantern which the gardener carried illumined a gruesome sight. Prostrate by the bedside, as it had fallen, was the black-robed body, and Thistelton groaned out in consternation :

"Lord help us! he *is* dead, after all!"

Sir Julian stepped forward quickly, bent down, flung aside the black drapery, and burst out laughing.

"Well, your friend scores," said he. "How he managed to introduce this dummy into your room remains to be discovered, but we must allow him credit for having contrived to give you a most successful fright."

Successfully frightened Mr. Thistelton may have been; but now that his fears were dispelled, his wits began to work rapidly. Remembering the locked door, he threw but one glance at the cleverly constructed lay-figure which was provoking the mirth of his companions, pushed past them, plunged his hand into the bed, found nothing under the pillow, and observed in the calm rueful accents appropriate to the magnitude of the catastrophe :

"It isn't Chilcott who scores, my dear Ellis; I might have known that Chilcott would never have had the pluck to play me such a trick. But some other damned scoundrel has, and I'm poorer to the tune of six or seven

thousand pounds than I was when I went to bed."

There was no doubt about that—the only question was whether the astute thief had had sufficient time to make off with his booty. It did not take Thiselton long to jump into his clothes, requisition Sir Julian's motor and place himself in communication both with the local constabulary and Scotland Yard; but from the outset he took a despondent view of the case, and the sequel justified his forebodings. Investigation was baffled by total lack of direct evidence and the absence of any sort of clue, beyond the bare facts that the miscreant must have known the value of a rather shabby-looking snuffbox and must also have been acquainted with its owner's habits. Such considerations might have tended to throw suspicion upon Vinney, had not that timorous wight been *omni suspicione minor*. Vinney shamefacedly owned that at the sound of a shot upstairs he had dived to the bottom of his bed, hoping for the best, while anticipating the worst. Asked whether he had not deemed it his duty to go to his master's assistance, he replied that he would have done so without hesitation if he had believed that there were mere human robbers in the house; but he had not believed, and did not believe, any such thing. Supernatural agency, he was persuaded, had been at work, and he thought they should all be thankful that there was nothing more serious than the loss of a few trinkets to deplore. The man was, in short, utterly demoralised, and Sir Julian, who made him the subject of brief medical examination, advised the prompt release which he continued to solicit. He was not in a state to attend to his work, and would only, by remaining on, have unnerved the other servants who behaved, upon the whole, better than might have been expected.

"Believe me, sir," were his valedictory words, "this has been meant as a first warning to you to quit, and I only wish you'd accept it as such! I don't pretend to account for the dummy—what's the use of trying to account for things past mortal under-

standing?—but it was no dummy that I saw stooping over your bed, sir; that I'll take my oath of!"

"Oh, go—go—!" returned Mr. Thiselton contemptuously.

So Vinney departed, accompanied, as it seemed, by the figment of his too active imagination. At any rate, during several ensuing months there was no reappearance of the Black Spectre, nor, alas! any tidings of the purloined snuffbox. Mr. Thiselton had almost ceased to think about his loss when one morning the post brought him an unsigned letter, the purport of which was that if he would take five hundred pounds on a certain afternoon to a certain address in Soho, and if he would solemnly pledge himself to refrain from proceedings against the persons residing there, his property should be restored to him. He ought, no doubt, as a public-spirited citizen, to have informed the police; only he was very sure that were he to do that he would never again set eyes upon an object of art which was worth fully ten times five hundred pounds. The appointed afternoon, therefore, found him at the door of the appointed house, which was opened by a demure, civil-spoken woman, who requested him to be so good as to step into the parlour. She then produced a Testament, swore him to secrecy, carefully counted the notes which, at her bidding, he laid upon the table and said:

"Quite correct, Mr. Thiselton, and thank you, sir. Now I'll just go and call my husband."

Presently in walked Mr. Vinney, with a deferential bow and smile, and—"Here's the little box, sir. The other trifles that were abstracted with it are beyond recovery, I regret to say."

"You infernal rascal!" roared Mr. Thiselton.

Vinney stroked his chin reflectively. "Well, sir, that's one way of looking at it. Another is that you're uncommonly lucky to get this unique article back at so low a figure. But, as you know, sir, there's great difficulty in disposing of such things."

"Pray don't apologise," said Mr. Thiselton sardonically. "You were in

the room when I shot your dressed-up bogey, I suppose?"

"I was, sir, and pulled its leg to bring it down by the run. I was under the bed at the moment, sir. You see it was really a very simple plan and easy to carry through, owing to your being such a heavy sleeper. Your running off for Sir Julian, as you did, gave me plenty of time to lock the door, nip out of the window, chuck away the ladder and get back to bed, in case you should call me."

"You would have looked pretty foolish if I hadn't gone for Sir Julian," Mr. Thiselton remarked.

"Well, sir, that's as may be. I'm

fairly resourceful, having had long experience. Anyway, we're bound to take some risks in our profession."

"I'll say for you that you acted the abject coward to the life," observed Mr. Thiselton pensively. "Even so, I ought to have suspected you."

Vinney smiled. "Really, sir, I think you ought," he agreed; "but I've often had occasion to notice that the cleverest people are the last to see what, so to speak, stares them in the face. Good evening, sir, and I do hope you'll give up that unprotected old house of yours; for I tell you frankly that it's a standing temptation to us."

