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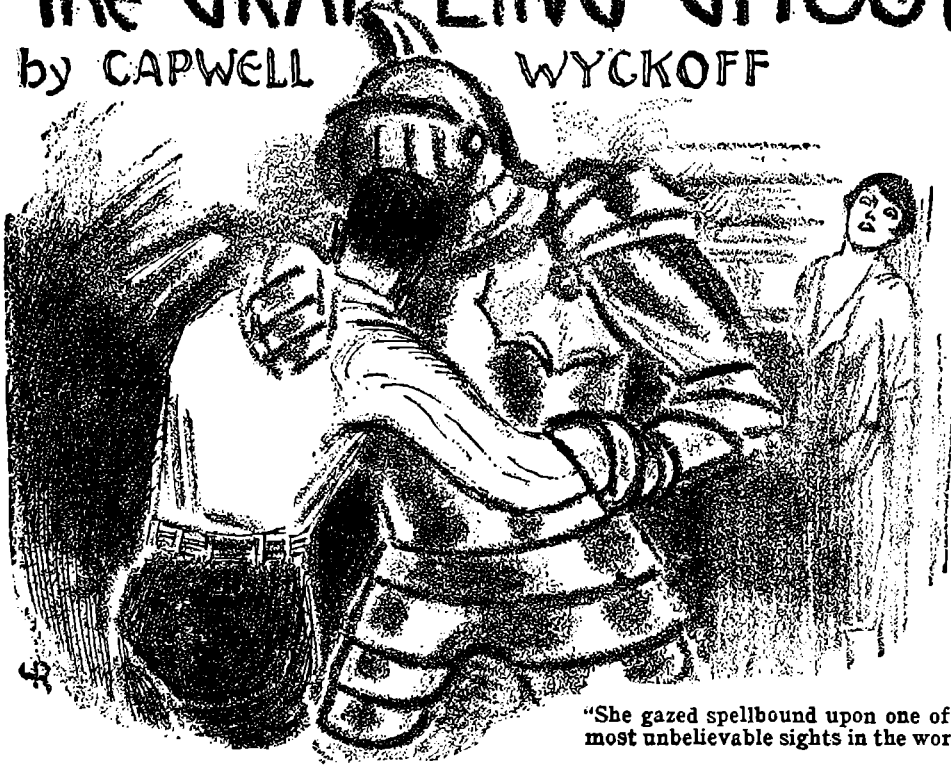
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The GRAPPLING GHOST

by CAPWELL

WYCKOFF



"She gazed spellbound upon one of the most unbelievable sights in the world."

IT IS queer what a difference a few hours make. The trivial events of the morning loomed in another light now. When we had come in for the week-end party, Prudence had been standing in the lower hall talking to a young man who I later learned was Roger Canfield. I caught only a scrap of the conversation, for Canfield was leaving. Willowby, who had arrived before us, was standing there listening, his eyes on Canfield.

"But if you *should* decide to sell—" Canfield said, but Prudence interrupted him tartly.

"This has been my home for twenty years and I have no fault to find with it," she answered. And then, although it might have been simply a fancy on my part, I thought

I caught a meaning glance from Canfield to Willowby, and an answering gleam in Willowby's eyes, but Canfield was gone then and I was not sure.

The whole thing passed from my mind then, and I enjoyed myself during the day, but at night.

We sat around Hunterton's parlor, listening uneasily to Willowby's talk. Our situation was uncomfortable in the extreme. All lights had gone out early in the evening; the servants, I learned, had left the day before; and a howling wind and rain storm rattled the casements and shook the doors. Since 6 o'clock we had sat in the wavering glow of candle-light and had talked in hushed voices, starting at every fresh gust that set the big house vibrating. And Willowby, who knew

the history of Melancholy House better than Hunterton did, insisted on talking about the most weird things.

Weird, at that time. Probably they would have seemed commonplace in the daytime. But Melancholy House had gained its name honestly; we all knew that sorrow had dwelt eternally under its roof. I didn't quite see why Hunterton ever wanted to have his party in that house. Down in town Hunterton owned a house that was the envy of his neighbors, but his secret delight was this ugly, sinister mansion which hid in the woods, the home of his elderly sister and her ward. Personally, I felt queer about coming, and now, marooned beside the fireplace, fascinated and alarmed by Willowby's talk, I wished I had pleaded another engagement and had remained in Boston.

There were eight of us. Prudence Hunterton, of course; she lived in the place: a fine-looking old lady, some years Hunterton's senior, rather sharp of tongue and nervous, but with a reserve. She never went to pieces. Hunterton was there, and Willowby, and Garry Bainbridge. The ladies—Margy Bronte, Hilda and Mary Duffield and Ann Hunterton—lent the only cheerful touch to our company. Hunterton sat close to Margy; Garry watched Mary Duffield; Prudence watched us all; and I suppose I was expected to take care of Hilda Duffield, but I spent my time watching Willowby and Ann Hunterton.

Ann was a Hunterton by adoption, and we all knew that Willowby was deeply in love with her. Temperamentally they were suited, for Willowby was grave and serious, a thinker and a philosopher, and Ann so deeply quiet that she had earned the name of Pensive Ann. At the time that Willowby was so insistent on telling ghost-stories, Ann appeared to be the only one of us who was not alarmed and yet enthralled. She

stared silently into the fire. With the candles in back of us, and the red firelight in front of us, our shadows moved and spread with disconcerting suddenness upon the walls and the floor, and Charlie Willowby insisted on relating the various legends relating to the house where our sorry party was taking place.

"But the best story of all," said Willowby, his keen eyes sweeping the circle, "is that of the Grappling Ghost."

Prudence's lip quivered momentarily. "Mr. Willowby, please! I'm sure there are other subjects that will interest us more than this one. I suggest that tomorrow morning, when the sun is out, you tell us that particular story, and as many others as you can recall. Just now——"

"Pardon me," Willowby interrupted, quietly. "I think in one point, my dear Miss Hunterton, you are wrong."

"Explain yourself. In what am I wrong?" demanded Prudence, who disliked exceedingly to be told that she was wrong.

"To begin with," said Willowby, "I realize the effect that the storm and the absence of reliable lights has on us all. But I claim that our minds are all attuned to the weird and the thrilling right at the present moment as they never will be again."

He turned to the rest of us quickly. "To be honest, I ask you all if you haven't a secret desire in your hearts to talk upon unusual subjects at the moment?"

We had. Willowby had led up to the subject in such a way that to drop back into ordinary conversation would have been highly unsatisfying. I doubt if there was one among us who did not want to hear the story of the Grappling Ghost. Under Willowby's pressure, we admitted it.

"You see," Willowby nodded to Miss Hunterton, "I was right. And

it might explain your experience of a week ago."

"I hoped you wouldn't mention that," Prudence said, reproachfully.

Seeing us look with increased interest at her, Prudence felt obliged to tell us the story.

"One night last week," said Miss Hunterton, "I thought I heard Ann coughing; in fact, I did hear her coughing, and so I got up and crossed the upper hall, neglecting to make a light, for I know every inch of the place, and don't need a light. But before I reached her door, and just as I was passing the end of the hall, just where it turns, a very cold hand was placed firmly on my arm! It was no trick of the imagination; I'm not given to dreams or scares. I felt it! It unnerved me so that I gasped aloud and ran into my room. The hand made no attempt to detain me; it simply slid off from my arm. When I had gained sufficient courage, I lighted a candle and searched the hall, but found nothing amiss. I then went into Ann's room and found her sound asleep. That's all."

"The Grappling Ghost!" said Willowby, triumphantly.

"Nonsense! Don't be silly!" cried Prudence, tartly. "I don't believe in legends and ghost-stories. I simply don't like to hear 'em on a night like this, that's all."

"Suppose," drawled Garry, with assumed ease, "that you relate this gripping story, Charlie." Garry smiled at what he considered a brilliant sally, but no one appeared to notice it.

The invitation was all that Willowby needed. He launched into the story without waste of time. Apparently he was telling it simply for the joy of making us feel uneasy, yet I couldn't help feeling that he had a real motive in it all.

"I SUPPOSE that you have all noticed the armored figure at the top of the stairs?" he began. And after we had all nodded, he went on: "That particular suit of armor belonged to Sir Godfrey Montmorency, a noble knight of the Crusades. One look at that suit of armor will convince you that Sir Godfrey was a massive man. It is broader than the ordinary. That may not have struck you as it did me, but I've had several chances to look over armor, especially when I was in England and France; and when I first saw that outfit I knew that the original wearer must have been a man of massive limb. So, from Mr. Canfield, who owned this house before friend Hunterton purchased it, I learned its history. Hunterton knows the legend, and so does Miss Hunterton. I doubt if anyone else does.

"This Sir Godfrey Montmorency went to the Holy Land during the time of the Crusades. He wore that grim suit of armor which stands at the head of the stairs. And Sir Godfrey's pride and joy was not his flashing sword, nor his keen spear, nor his whistling battle-ax, but his faith was in the strength of his arms and his legs and his thighs. He loved to grapple with his enemies. Countless stories are told of his prowess in physical battle. Man to man, arm to arm, locked in a death grip, Sir Godfrey loved to fight his battles. A hundred stories are told of how he threw away his sword in the midst of the battle, to rush at his foe and grind him in the crushing strength of his mighty arms.

"Sir Godfrey returned from the Crusades with a mighty record, and unharmed. But he returned to find that others had seized his own possessions. He quietly recruited a following and besieged his own stronghold. Then came the moment when he was face to face with his foe, and Sir Godfrey challenged him to

single combat, a combat of purely physical strength. With alacrity his invitation was accepted. They met in front of the two small armies, which had drawn apart to watch. Sir Godfrey was crushing his foe slowly but surely between his mighty arms, when the false knight, suddenly drawing a concealed dagger, slipped it between the bars of Godfrey's visor, killing him instantly. The army of the foe swept Godfrey's forces from the field, and the grappling knight was stripped of his armor and his body was dropped down a well. His armor, which is on the landing above us, was kept in the castle, later sold, and Mr. Canfield's ancestors brought it with them when they built the house here.

"And now for the legend. It is simply this: Sir Godfrey's ghost, never destined to be still and at peace because of the trick played on him, comes back from time to time and enters the armor. The suit of armor may then be found walking around the house, seeking someone to grapple with; and heaven help anyone who is abroad at night when the Grappling Ghost is on the roam! That's all there is to it."

"And that's enough," said Margy, who had been grasping Hunterton's hand. "I'm feeling cold all over now."

"I'm not going up to bed and pass that armor," Hilda Duffield said, firmly.

"You think that explains the touch on Miss Hunterton's arm?" I asked, smiling.

"She was just around the corner from that suit of armor when she was seized," Willowby said, turning his eyes away from Ann, who had not moved during the entire recital.

"Stuff and nonsense!" sniffed Prudence, getting up. "I wasn't seized; somebody—or something—just placed a hand on my arm, that's all. That's enough, I grant you

that. I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm going up. I'm tired, and I don't want to hear any more of Mr. Willowby's horrid tales. I've lived here for twenty years, without thinking as much about 'em all as he has in an hour. Good-night."

A little later on we all went up. There was simply nothing else to do. Attempts at bridge had been failures. After Willowby finished his story we sat and stared into the fire, listening to the wild beating of the rain on the windows, and shivering slightly when we heard the mournful wail of a boat horn. We all wanted to go to bed, but no one wanted to start.

But finally Hunterton led us up the broad stairs, candle in hand, and we all had a close look at the black, forbidding suit of armor which stood solidly on a pedestal at the top of the stairs. A menacing, warlike article it was, very wide and short, and we felt a thrill of wonder and uneasiness as we looked at it. We didn't stay long, for the girls were frankly scared by it, and I must confess that we men felt better when we had left it behind us. The only one who seemed truly interested in it was Willowby. As for Pensive Ann, she passed it by, and went into her room without so much as looking at it.

I HAD a small room to myself, and I was soon in bed. I had hoped for sleep, but none came. The ceaseless beat of wind and rain and the creaking of shutters and a loose door below kept me awake. Then, quite suddenly, I sat up in bed with a gasp.

It wasn't that anything had happened, but that I had remembered something. I was to make a very important call to Boston, and had forgotten to do so. A business deal hinged on it, and I must make the call. The events of the evening had completely brushed it from my mind, and now I wondered if it were not too late. No, after thinking a mo-

ment, I was sure that it was not. It was about 10.30, and Pemberton always remained up until a very late hour. I knew where the telephone was, and I must go down and make the call.

At that thought, I paused and sat down slowly on the edge of the bed. I will never make the statement that I am a brave man, and I was probably less brave tonight than ever before. Willowby's cursed stories had put me into a frame of mind that was far from comfortable. I knew that I must go down those wide stairs, first passing that suggestive iron figure at the head of the steps, and with only the light that a candle gives. At the same time I cursed Willowby and his stories and my own habit of forgetting, but a moment later, with candle in hand, I was out in the hall, silently traversing the corridor.

I never so much as looked at the armor of the Grappling Knight, but turned my head and looked over the banisters. Without making a sound I went to the telephone, softly called the number, and then had to wait for a few minutes—long, scary, uneasy minutes—while my call was put through. But finally I got Pemberton on the wire, and began to talk to him. Abruptly I ceased to talk to my partner.

"Hello! What's the matter?" Pemberton called over the wire.

"Oh—nothing!" I answered, as soon as I had caught my breath. "But we haven't any lights up here, and my candle just went out. A little draft, I guess."

But I hadn't felt any draft.

It was certainly dark after that. I finished the conversation and hung up the receiver, peering into the darkness. The last red gleam had left the fireplace. Not a light showed upstairs, and I didn't know where to look for matches. In short, I must grope my way up the stairs, down the hall, and into my bedroom in the

inky darkness. I felt like saying a blessing for Melancholy House, tightened the cord on my bathrobe—which didn't tighten my uneasy heart any—and felt my way to the stairs.

My fingers found the stair rail, and the next instant the unlighted candle fell with a crash to the floor. A hand closed over my wrist with sudden force, and an arm circled my body at the same time. The weird story of the Grappling Ghost shot through my mind in an instant. For a space of time that seemed endless I stood while the arm tightened, then, in a frenzy I began to struggle, simply switching my body in an effort to free myself of the arms. In the midst of the struggle something cut into my finger, on the under side, but the impression was fleeting, for my mind was occupied only with the desire to break away and run.

I cried out, and aroused the household. At my cry the grappler suddenly vanished from my side, and when Prudence and Hunterton reached the landing, each with a candle in hand, I was alone, sitting on the bottom step, panting for breath and dripping with cold perspiration. They rushed down and poured out questions.

Hilda, Garry, Mary, and last of all Ann, came running down the stairs and gathered around me. I told them what had happened. Stark horror gathered over them all.

"I'm going to call the police," announced Hunterton, moving toward the telephone.

"There is no use in doing that," Prudence advised. "No policeman, especially the kind we have in Rockton, would come up here tonight, in a storm like this."

But Hunterton picked up the telephone. "Just the same, I'm going to call them," he said. But after a moment, he put down the telephone.

"Didn't you just use this 'phone?" he asked me.

I told him that I had.

"Well, it's dead now," replied Hunterton, grimly.

"Where," said Hilda, suddenly, her voice the least bit squeaky, "is Mr. Willowby? And where is Margy?"

"Here I am," Margy cried, from the upper landing. "But I don't know where Mr. Willowby is. I just knocked at his door, and receiving no answer, took the liberty of opening the door and looking in. He hasn't even been to bed, because his bed is undisturbed."

Charlie Hunterton frowned darkly, looking from one to the other of us. "I wonder if Willowby is playing any foolish jokes? If he is, I feel that I won't be able to forgive him. I like a joke myself, but——"

A tiny flame of light came fluttering down from the landing above. Margy had dropped her candle, and it flashed by me, to lie sputtering on the carpet. A moment later and Margy was running down the stairs, to throw herself into Hunterton's arms, out of breath, gasping with terror.

"My God!" she panted. "It's gone!"

"Margy!" Hunterton cried. "What's gone?"

"The suit of armor!" She slumped into his arms in a dead faint.

For an instant we stood spell-bound; then Garry, coolest of us all, leaped up the stairs, followed by Hunterton, who passed the inert form of Margy to the Duffield girls. Their shadows danced on the wall, then stopped, and we could see the niche where the armor had stood.

The niche was empty.

Prudence broke the silence which followed our gasps. "Why, my heavens! That thing has stood there for a hundred and fifty years. Who moved it?"

Hunterton and Garry walked slowly down the stairs, declining to search the upper floor, and we looked blankly at each other. Alone in that evil house, with the storm outside, telephone communication cut off, and that terrifying suit of armor roaming around the house, silently grappling for victims! An amusing company we must surely have looked, as we stood around in bathrobes and slippers, but nobody thought of the humorous part, just then.

"I'm past thinking that Willowby is playing a joke, now," said Hunterton. "Only an idiot would do a thing like that. There is only one thing for us to do." He moved to the fireplace, piled logs and applied paper. With his candle he lighted it, and a welcome flare of light followed. "We'll simply have to sit around here until morning. In the daylight we can run down the ghost and find Willowby, but I'm sure you all feel as I do, that no one wants to go prowling around at this time of night."

"But what if something terrible has happened to Mr. Willowby?" suggested Prudence, the practical.

"That's true," Garry said. "We've got to make a search for him." But I noted that there was no eagerness in Garry's tone when he said it.

"I'll at least call him," Hunterton offered. "Willowby! I say, Willowby!"

Willowby's name went echoing down the halls and through the house, but nothing like an answer came back.

Margy had regained consciousness by this time, and she was sitting on the sofa with Hilda and Mary. Prudence stood near the fireplace, and I sat in a big chair, close beside Ann, who occupied a settle. Garry and Hunterton looked uncertainly at each other, and then Garry took up one of the candles.

"Let's go, Charlie," he said quietly.

I felt that I should offer to go along, although I didn't want to go. But Hunterton told me to stay with the ladies, and he and Garry disappeared into the dining-room, leaving us beside the fire.

WHILE we sat there in gloomy silence, they searched the downstairs of the house. It seemed like hours, but in reality it took only a few minutes. It was with relief that we saw them come back through the curtains that screened off the dining-room.

"Not a thing," Garry replied to our unspoken question. "Now, I suppose we ought to look upstairs."

"I suppose so." Hunterton spoke as reluctantly as Garry.

We all of us had our backs to the stairs. And we all heard a whistling noise, which sprang up from our own company. Hilda Duffield had made it. Looking at her we saw that her lips were open, her eyes wide and staring, her bosom heaving rapidly. A light of sudden madness was in her gray eyes.

"Good Lord!" came through her set teeth. "Look—on the stairs!"

With a perfectly timed motion we swung toward the stairs.

Half-way down, one gauntleted hand clutching the railing, stood the Grappling Ghost.

At least it was that horrible suit of armor. Broad of shoulder, greaved, buckled and helmeted, the figure stood there for a second, looking down at us. Then it began to move forward, setting each mailed foot on the steps with care and deliberation. We could not see behind the lowered visor, yet we felt that keen eyes were watching us. As the awful figure, only half seen in the light of the candles and the fire, descended, one mailed foot tore a splinter from the step, and we heard the wood rip. While we waited in painful silence, the Grappling Ghost

reached the bottom of the stairs and faced us, arms apart, head bent forward.

I remember perfectly how we were placed. The three girls on the sofa seemed frozen to it. Prudence stood stiffly beside the fire, like a soldier about to be shot, awaiting the explosion of the guns. I sat riveted to my chair, and Ann's hand had closed over mine, her grip growing tighter each moment. On the other side of the table Garry and Hunterton stood steadily, our only fighters worth the name, and rather shaky, at that.

But it was Garry who broke the tense silence. He stepped to the fireplace, reached down and got a poker, never taking his eyes from the armored figure. He had placed his candle on the table.

"You take this, Hunterton." Garry placed the poker in Hunterton's cold hand and hitched his own bathrobe a bit more tightly at the waist. "Let's go for this ghost, Charlie."

Garry, the athlete, the football player, looked suddenly magnificent to us. Hunterton, without moving his head, spoke to him.

"What are you going to do?"

Garry laughed boyishly, looking with shining eyes at the grim figure that faced them. I thought we were all going a little mad.

"Well," Garry said, "I heard that this fellow was a first-class wrestler. I've done a little of it myself. And up to the present time, if the story runs true, he's only had a chance to wrestle with Saracens and foreigners in general. I'm spoiling to see what he can do with an American. Don't butt in unless he tries to pull a fast one, Hunterton."

And with that, suddenly crouching a bit, but moving steadily forward, Garry Bainbridge made for the Grappling Ghost. We all saw the ghost move arms that clanked softly, move one foot a trifle back with care, and extend one arm a bit farther than the

other. Warily Garry moved about him, seeking an opening, while we gazed spellbound upon one of the most unbelievable sights in the world.

With lightning suddenness Garry rushed in, seizing the extended arm of the ghost and jerking it toward him. The other arm he pushed back, causing the armored figure to swing sideways. But the grappler was prepared, and with speed swung one leg back of Garry's, hooking the young man just above the knee. Down on his back went Garry, his feet slipping out from under him, and sliding with a rush upon the carpet. Hunterton started forward, his poker upraised.

The Grappling Ghost raised its ugly helmet, and a flash of hidden fire seemed to leap from the bars of the visor, the same bars through which the false knight had thrust the dagger which had ended the career of the original grappling knight. It proved his undoing. Garry seized one greaved leg, pushing it backward with all his strength, at the same time thrusting the leg upward. The armored figure fell to the floor with a crash which shook the room, and Garry rolled over, gained his feet, and made a flying leap onto the prostrate form. With a savage motion he twisted off the helmet and flung it to one side.

"Willowby, of course," gasped Garry, sitting on the broad shoulders.

WILLOWBY shook Garry off, rising slowly to his feet; and standing thus, he faced us all with a cool smile. The girls relaxed and grew cold; Hunterton frowned in deep displeasure; Prudence smiled sourly.

"A very, very funny trick, Willowby," said Hunterton, a sneer on his face. "Quite appropriate for the time and place. A clever way to keep us amused until morning."

"That's what I thought," said Willowby, breathing heavily, and

looking at Garry, who was standing in an attitude of offense beside him, ready to spring at the least sign of movement on Willowby's part. "I was merely illustrating one of my stories. I thought you'd like it better if it was illustrated. A thousand pardons for upset nerves!"

He attempted a grin of easy assurance, but it was a failure. I noted that his eyes were not still, that he was continually glancing about the room. He endeavored to do so in a manner calculated to escape our notice, but if such was his idea, it was a failure. Our senses were sharpened by the proceedings of the night, and we all noticed it. He twisted his head slightly to one side, glancing up the stairs, and then faced us again, hesitating.

The pause was awkward. We all felt a contempt for him, but did not know just what to say. The trick, if such it had been, was in decided bad taste. The thought, calmly dwelt upon, was absurd; Willowby was not insane, and it was scarcely to be supposed that a man with his intelligence would waste his time in a game so cheap and useless. It was with a start that another idea came to me.

I got up with some nervous trembling and made my way to the "ghost." Willowby watched my approach with suspicion, and drew off slightly as I approached him. I placed one hand on his mailed sleeve and he withdrew the arm with unnecessary haste.

"Would—would you mind taking off that armor?" I asked.

He frowned savagely, glancing hurriedly toward the hall, which was back of me.

"What for?" he demanded, his eyes narrowing.

"I wish to find out something," I answered, again reaching for the right arm.

He hurriedly drew to one side, glancing toward the company. Hunterton came forward.

"I don't know what Mr. Wallace wants," said our host. "But in view of the scare you gave us, Willowby, I think you should do that little thing for us."

"He'll do it for us!" Garry had spoken, quietly, but with an unmistakable ring in his voice. He walked to Willowby and looked him squarely in the eyes. "I'll give you a minute in which to decide whether you're going to shed those iron duds, Willowby!"

THERE was a period of chilly silence while Willowby and Garry eyed each other balefully, but after what seemed an age Willowby sullenly began to undo the straps that held the shoulder-plates in place. The upper sheets came off, and then Willowby made a frantic effort to reach the straps that crossed the back of his armor. He gave it up finally, and then seemed to shrink perceptibly as a certain light dawned in Garry's eyes.

"By George!" breathed Garry. "He can't undo them! And if he can't reach the straps to open them, he couldn't reach the straps to do them up. Willowby, who dressed you in that suit of armor?"

That was more than I had figured out. The others stood spellbound, held by another feeling, the return of uncertainty. Willowby shifted his eyes ever so slightly and watched the hall door, though for only a moment. He opened his mouth to reply, and then realized the futility of telling a lie that was obvious to all. Before he could say anything, I began, with fingers that trembled, to open the snaps on his arm-plates.

"I want to help you in your latest theory," I said, forcing open the last buckle, and running my hand along his arm. "Ah! This is not the

man who attacked me down here by the stairs!"

"How do you know?" snapped Hunterton.

"In my struggle," I said, taking the armor off Willowby's other arm, "I happened to run one hand up his arm, and I felt that the man who grasped me wore arm-bands, the kind that hold up the sleeves, you know." I passed my hand up Willowby's left arm and then shook my head. "Mr. Willowby has no such article of wearing-apparel on his person. And then, too, something scratched my hand; as you can see, it is bleeding slightly. Mr. Willowby wears no rings. Gentlemen—and ladies—it is absolutely apparent that there is someone else at large in this house besides Mr. Willowby!"

A gasp went up from the others, and it was then that I first saw the warning gleam in Willowby's eyes. He had been looking over my shoulder and in the direction of the hall door, as he had been for the past few minutes. I turned before the others did and I saw it. Something black descended over the candles, which had been massed on the center table, and they went out abruptly. The red glow of the fire only intensified the gloom.

Several things happened then. I was bowled over in Willowby's frantic rush and I heard a medley of screams from the ladies. Hunterton uttered a single word, basically profane, and then I think I heard him run. Garry, as I afterward learned, threw himself in the general direction of Willowby, and the sounds of a fierce struggle ensued.

Afterward it was all clear, but at the time it was chaos. I heard Hunterton, who knew the lay of the house, rushing accurately through the hall door, to snatch up a forgotten flashlight that was on the hall table. Faintly, from my position on the floor, jammed against an armchair,

I saw a gleam of strong light. I heard the crash of breaking glass, and then nothing was audible except the violent thrashing around on the floor.

Finally, after what seemed an age, Hunterton returned and lighted the candles. A curtain had been tossed over them from the hall, and had been thrown so accurately as to put them out all at once. We looked to the foot of the stairs, to find Garry grimly seated on the prostrate form of Willowby, who was neatly trussed up in the bonds of Garry's bathrobe cord. Hunterton walked sternly over to Willowby, who glared up at him.

"He got away," said Hunterton, speaking through fast-clenched teeth, "but I saw who it was. Willowby, what was young Roger Canfield doing here?"

"Roger Canfield!" Prudence cried, winding up her hair, which I suspect one of the girls had pulled down in the excitement.

"Yes, Roger Canfield." Hunterton jerked Willowby erect.

"You had better tell," Prudence said, grimly. "For I can guess what it was all about, now."

"He'll tell," Garry promised, thrusting his face near Willowby's. "Mr. Willowby, if you know what's good for you, you'll talk!"

Willowby realized that the game was up, and he talked. He was pretty shamefaced about it, too.

"How many times has Roger Canfield been here to coax you into selling his father's place back to him?" he asked Prudence.

"Three times," said the lady. "And I've told him flatly that I won't sell under any circumstances. He mentioned that the place had an evil reputation and that it was an unhealthful house for anyone. I asked him why he wanted to buy it so badly, and he said that it had a sentimental attraction for him. I knew that wasn't his reason, of

course, but no matter what it was, I wouldn't sell it to him. I know as well as he does that this region is growing up fast and that the property will be worth a lot of money in a few years."

"That is the whole story," nodded Willowby, head averted. "He works with Trumit and Betts, and he was in on a tip that a large price was to be offered for the house and property, with the view of turning it into a summer place. I guess you can see the same promise in the land as he can. Well, I—I'm a bit indebted to Canfield; got into a stock scrape with him, and didn't know how I was going to get out of it. A few days ago we were speaking about the place, and he told me that you wouldn't sell it under any circumstances. Spoke of the various stories connected with the place, and then the same idea took possession. To make a long story short, he hired me to help him scare you folks so that you wouldn't care to stay here. We arranged for this little game tonight, and the storm helped us wonderfully.

"But he didn't carry out his end of the plot. He dressed me in this iron suit and we were to scare you as best we could under the circumstances. He was surprized downstairs by Mr. Wallace and grappled with him, which was all right so far as it went; it served to bring you all together. But his part was to snuff out those candles when I was walking down the stairs, and I was to disappear before you got them lighted again. We didn't have a very connected plan, but it was to work itself out as things went along.

"I can explain that cold hand business, Miss Hunterton. Roger has a key, and he was in the house on the night you spoke of. He was caught in the hall by you, and it came to him that it would be a good plan to scare you by touching you, and he

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The Grappling Ghost

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did. I knew that he was in there tonight; heard him tap on the wall while we were talking, but you thought it was part of the story.

"That's all there was in it, I'm sorry for the scare I've given you, but—well, if you knew the truth, I'm in, I'm sure you'd forgive me."

WILLOWBY went away very early the next morning. I subsequently learned that he married a girl, and I suspect, from the fact that the events of the night didn't so frighten her, that she might have known something about it all along. However, we had a good deal of business in the neighborhood of Melancholy House. In a few years later the Hunters returned, and realized a large profit on their investment, and the armor disappeared, and Prudence kept the secret of its disposal to herself.

But on the morning when Willowby and the rest of us went away, I noticed that the old lady was looking remarkably grim—making a face at it, I thought. Margy Bront told her about it.

"Well," said Prudence, "the Scriptures tell us that forgiveness is divine. Mr. Willowby has given us a good lesson, and we had given us. Humph! I'm sure to be divine, that's all!"