

# The Haunted House

By Edith Nesbit

'Twas by the merest accident that Desmond ever went to the Haunted House. He had been away from England for six years, and the nine months' leave taught him how easily one drops out of one's place.

He had taken rooms at the Greyhound before he found that there was no reason why he should stay in Elmstead rather than in any other of London's dismal outposts. He wrote to all the friends whose addresses he could remember, and settled himself to await their answers.

He wanted someone to talk to, and there was no one. Meantime he lounged on the horsehair sofa with the advertisements, and his pleasant grey eyes followed line after line with intolerable boredom. Then, suddenly, 'Halloa!' he said, and sat up. This is what he read:

A HAUNTED HOUSE.—Advertiser is anxious to have phenomena investigated. Any properly accredited investigator will be given full facilities. Address, by letter only, Wildon Prior, 237, Museum Street, London.

'That's rum!' he said. Wildon Prior had been the best wicket-keeper in his club. It wasn't a common name. Anyway, it was worth trying, so he sent off a telegram.

'Wildon Prior, 237, Museum Street, London. May I come to you for a day or two and see the ghost?—WILLIAM DESMOND.'

On returning next day from a stroll there was an orange envelope on the wide Pembroke table in his parlour.

'Delighted—expect you today. Book to Crittenden from Charing Cross. Wire train.—WILDON PRIOR, Ormehurst Rectory, Kent.'

'So that's all right,' said Desmond, and went off to pack his bag and ask in the bar for a timetable. 'Good old Wildon; it will be ripping, seeing him again.'

A curious little omnibus, rather like a bathing-machine, was waiting outside Crittenden Station, and its driver, a swarthy, blunt-faced little man, with liquid eyes, said, 'You a friend of Mr Prior, sir?' shut him up in the bathing-machine, and banged the door on him. It was a very long drive, and less pleasant than it would have been in an open carriage.

The last part of the journey was through a wood; then came a churchyard and a church, and the bathing-machine turned in at a gate under heavy trees and drew up in front of a white house with bare, gaunt windows.

'Cheerful place, upon my soul!' Desmond told himself, as he tumbled out of the back of the bathing-machine.

The driver set his bag on the discoloured doorstep and drove off. Desmond pulled a rusty chain, and a big-throated bell jangled above his head.

Nobody came to the door, and he rang again. Still nobody came, but he heard a window thrown open above the porch. He stepped back on to the gravel and looked up.

A young man with rough hair and pale eyes was looking out. Not Wildon, nothing like Wildon. He did not speak, but he seemed to be making signs; and the signs seemed to mean, 'Go away!'

'I came to see Mr Prior,' said Desmond. Instantly and softly the window closed.

'Is it a lunatic asylum I've come to by chance?' Desmond asked himself, and pulled again at the rusty chain.

Steps sounded inside the house, the sound of boots on stone. Bolts were shot back, the door opened, and Desmond, rather hot and a little annoyed, found himself looking into a pair of very dark, friendly eyes, and a very pleasant voice said:

'Mr Desmond, I presume? Do come in and let me apologize.'

The speaker shook him warmly by the hand, and he found himself following down a flagged passage a man of more than mature age, well-dressed, handsome, with an air of competence and alertness which we associate with what is called 'a man of the world'. He opened a door and led the way into a shabby, bookish, leathery room.

'Do sit down, Mr Desmond.'

'This must be the uncle, I suppose,' Desmond thought, as he fitted himself into the shabby, perfect curves of the armchair. 'How's Wildon?' he asked, aloud. 'All right, I hope?'

The other looked at him. 'I beg your pardon,' he said, doubtfully.

'I was asking how Wildon is?'

'I am quite well, I thank you,' said the other man, with some formality.

'I beg your pardon'—it was now Desmond's turn to say it—'I did not realize that your name might be Wildon, too. I meant Wildon Prior.'

'I am Wildon Prior,' said the other, 'and you, I presume, are the expert from the Psychological Society?'

'Good Lord, no!' said Desmond. 'I'm Wildon Prior's friend, and, of course, there must be two Wildon Priors.'

'You sent the telegram? You are Mr Desmond? The Psychological Society were to send an expert, and I thought—'

'I see,' said Desmond; 'and I thought you were Wildon Prior, an old friend of mine—a young man,' he said, and half rose.

'Now, don't,' said Wildon Prior. 'No doubt it is my nephew who is your friend. Did he know you were coming? But of course he didn't. I am wandering. But I'm exceedingly glad to see you. You will stay, will you not? If you can endure to be the guest of an old man. And I will write to Will tonight and ask him to join us.'

'That's most awfully good of you,' Desmond assured him. 'I shall be glad to stay. I was awfully pleased when I saw Wildon's name in the paper, because—' And out came the tale of Elmstead, its loneliness and disappointment.

Mr Prior listened with the kindest interest.

'And you have not found your friends? How sad! But they will write to you. Of course, you left your address?'

'I didn't, by Jove!' said Desmond. 'But I can write. Can I catch the post?'

'Easily,' the elder man assured him. 'Write your letters now. My man shall take them to the post, and then we will have dinner, and I will tell you about the ghost.'

Desmond wrote his letters quickly, Mr Prior just then reappearing. 'Now I'll take you to your room,' he said, gathering the letters in long, white hands. 'You'll like a rest. Dinner at eight.'

The bed-chamber, like the parlour, had a pleasant air of worn luxury and accustomed comfort.

'I hope you will be comfortable,' the host said, with courteous solicitude. And Desmond was quite sure that he would.

Three covers were laid, the swarthy man who had driven Desmond from the station stood behind the host's chair, and a figure came towards Desmond and his host from the shadows beyond the yellow circles of the silver-sticked candles.

'My assistant, Mr Verney,' said the host, and Desmond surrendered his hand to the limp, damp touch of the man who had seemed to say to him, from the window above the porch, 'Go away!' Was Mr Prior perhaps a doctor who received 'paying guests', persons who were, in Desmond's phrase, 'a bit barmy'? But he had said 'assistant'.

'I thought,' said Desmond, hastily, 'you would be a clergyman. The Rectory, you know—I thought Wildon, my friend Wildon, was staying with an uncle who was a clergyman.'

'Oh, no,' said Mr Prior. 'I rent the Rectory. The rector thinks it is damp. The church is disused, too. It is not considered safe, and they can't afford to restore it. Claret to Mr Desmond, Lopez.' And the swarthy, blunt-faced man filled his glass.

'I find this place very convenient for my experiments. I dabble a little in chemistry, Mr Desmond, and Verney here assists me.'

Verney murmured something that sounded like 'only too proud', and subsided.

'We all have our hobbies, and chemistry is mine,' Mr Prior went on. 'Fortunately, I have a little income which enables me to indulge it. Wildon, my nephew, you know, laughs at me, and calls it the science of smells. But it's absorbing, very absorbing.'

After dinner Verney faded away, and Desmond and his host stretched their feet to what Mr Prior called a 'handful of fire', for the evening had grown chill.

'And now,' Desmond said, 'won't you tell me the ghost story?'

The other glanced round the room.

'There isn't really a ghost story at all. It's only that—well, it's never happened to me personally, but it happened to Verney, poor lad, and he's never been quite his own self since.'

Desmond flattered himself on his insight.

'Is mine the haunted room?' he asked.

'It doesn't come to any particular room,' said the other, slowly, 'nor to any particular person.'

'Anyone may happen to see it?'

'No one sees it. It isn't the kind of ghost that's seen or heard.'

'I'm afraid I'm rather stupid, but I don't understand,' said Desmond, roundly. 'How can it be a ghost, if you neither hear it nor see it?'

'I did not say it was a ghost,' Mr Prior corrected. 'I only say that there is something about this house which is not ordinary. Several of my assistants have had to leave; the thing got on their nerves.'

'What became of the assistants?' asked Desmond.

'Oh, they left, you know; they left,' Prior answered, vaguely. 'One couldn't expect them to sacrifice their health. I sometimes think—village gossip is a deadly thing, Mr Desmond—that perhaps they were prepared to be frightened; that they fancy things. I hope the Psychological Society's expert won't be a neurotic. But even without being a neurotic one might—but you don't believe in ghosts, Mr Desmond. Your Anglo-Saxon common sense forbids it.'

'I'm afraid I'm not exactly Anglo-Saxon,' said Desmond. 'On my father's side I'm pure Celt; though I know I don't do credit to the race.'

'And on your mother's side?' Mr Prior asked, with extraordinary eagerness; an eagerness so sudden and disproportioned to the question that Desmond stared. A faint touch of resentment as suddenly stirred in him, the first spark of antagonism to his host.

‘Oh,’ he said, lightly, ‘I think I must have Chinese blood, I get on so well with the natives in Shanghai, and they tell me I owe my nose to a Red Indian great grandmother.’

‘No negro blood, I suppose?’ the host asked, with almost discourteous insistence.

‘Oh, I wouldn’t say that,’ Desmond answered. He meant to say it laughing, but he didn’t. ‘My hair, you know—it’s a very stiff curl it’s got, and my mother’s people were in the West Indies a few generations ago. You’re interested in distinctions of race, I take it?’

‘Not at all, not at all,’ Mr Prior surprisingly assured him; ‘but, of course, any details of your family are necessarily interesting to me. I feel,’ he added, with another of his winning smiles, ‘that you and I are already friends.’

Desmond could not have reasoningly defended the faint quality of dislike that had begun to tinge his first pleasant sense of being welcomed and wished for as a guest.

‘You’re very kind,’ he said; ‘it’s jolly of you to take in a stranger like this.’

Mr Prior smiled, handed the cigar-box, mixed whisky and soda, and began to talk about the history of the house.

‘The foundations are almost certainly thirteenth century. It was a priory, you know. There’s a curious tale, by the way, about the man Henry gave it to when he smashed up the monasteries. There was a curse; there seems always to have been a curse—’

The gentle, pleasant, high-bred voice went on. Desmond thought he was listening, but presently he roused himself and dragged his attention back to the words that were being spoken.

‘—that made the fifth death. . . . There is one every hundred years, and always in the same mysterious way.’

Then he found himself on his feet, incredibly sleepy, and heard himself say:

‘These old stories are tremendously interesting. Thank you very much. I hope you won’t think me very uncivil, but I think I’d rather like to turn in; I feel a bit tired, somehow.’

‘But of course, my dear chap.’

Mr Prior saw Desmond to his room.

‘Got everything you want? Right. Lock the door if you should feel nervous. Of course, a lock can’t keep ghosts out, but I always feel as if it could,’ and with another of those pleasant, friendly laughs he was gone.

William Desmond went to bed a strong young man, sleepy indeed beyond his experience of sleepiness, but well and comfortable. He awoke faint and trembling, lying deep in the billows of the feather bed; and lukewarm waves of exhaustion swept through him. Where was he? What had happened? His brain, dizzy and weak at first, refused him any answer. When he remembered, the abrupt spasm of repulsion which he had felt so suddenly and unreasonably the night before came back to him in a hot, breathless flush. He had been drugged, he had been poisoned!

‘I must get out of this,’ he told himself, and blundered out of bed towards the silken bell-pull that he had noticed the night before hanging near the door.

As he pulled it, the bed and the wardrobe and the room rose up round him and fell on him, and he fainted.

When he next knew anything someone was putting brandy to his lips. He saw Prior, the kindest concern in his face. The assistant, pale and watery-eyed. The swarthy manservant, stolid, silent, and expressionless. He heard Verney say to Prior:

‘You see it was too much—I told you—’

‘Hush,’ said Prior, ‘he’s coming to.’

Four days later Desmond, lying on a wicker chair on the lawn, was a little disinclined for exertion, but no longer ill. Nourishing foods and drinks, beef-tea, stimulants, and constant care—these had brought him back to something like his normal state. He wondered at the vague suspicions, vaguely remembered, of that first night; they had all been proved absurd by the unwavering care and kindness of everyone in the Haunted House.

‘But what caused it?’ he asked his host, for the fiftieth time. ‘What made me make such a fool of myself?’ And this time Mr Prior did not put him off, as he had always done before by begging him to wait till he was stronger.

‘I am afraid, you know,’ he said, ‘that the ghost really did come to you. I am inclined to revise my opinion of the ghost.’

‘But why didn’t it come again?’

‘I have been with you every night, you know,’ his host reminded him. And, indeed, the sufferer had never been left alone since the ringing of his bell on that terrible first morning.

‘And now,’ Mr Prior went on, ‘if you will not think me inhospitable, I think you will be better away from here. You ought to go to the seaside.’

‘There haven’t been any letters for me, I suppose?’ Desmond said, a little wistfully.

‘Not one. I suppose you gave the right address? Ormehurst Rectory, Crittenden, Kent?’

‘I don’t think I put Crittenden,’ said Desmond. ‘I copied the address from your telegram.’ He pulled the pink paper from his pocket.

‘Ah, that would account,’ said the other.

‘You’ve been most awfully kind all through,’ said Desmond, abruptly.

‘Nonsense, my boy,’ said the elder man, benevolently. ‘I only wish Willie had been able to come. He’s never written, the rascal! Nothing but the telegram to say he could not come and was writing.’

‘I suppose he’s having a jolly time somewhere,’ said Desmond, enviously; ‘but look here—do tell me about the ghost, if there’s anything to tell. I’m almost quite well now, and I should like to know what it was that made a fool of me like that.’

‘Well’—Mr Prior looked round him at the gold and red of dahlias and sunflowers, gay in the September sunshine—‘here, and now, I don’t know that it could do any harm. You remember that story of the man who got this place from Henry VIII, and the curse? That man’s wife is buried in a vault under the church. Well, there were legends, and I confess I was curious to see her tomb. There are iron gates to the vault. Locked, they were. I opened them with an old key—and I couldn’t get them to shut again.’

‘Yes?’ Desmond said.

‘You think I might have sent for a locksmith; but the fact is, there is a small crypt to the church, and I have used that crypt as a supplementary laboratory. If I had called anyone in to see to the lock they would have gossiped. I should have been turned out of my laboratory—perhaps out of my house.’

‘I see.’

‘Now, the curious thing is,’ Mr Prior went on, lowering his voice, ‘that it is only since that grating was opened that this house has been what they call “haunted”. It is since then that all the things have happened.’

‘What things?’

‘People staying here, suddenly ill—just as you were. And the attacks always seem to indicate loss of blood. And ‘He hesitated a moment. ‘That wound in your throat. I told you you had hurt yourself falling when you rang the bell. But that was not true. What is true is that you had on

your throat just the same little white wound that all the others have had. I wish'—he frowned—'that I could get that vault gate shut again. The key won't turn.'

'I wonder if I could do anything?' Desmond asked, secretly convinced that he had hurt his throat in falling, and that his host's story was, as he put it, 'all moonshine'. Still, to put a lock right was but a slight return for all the care and kindness. 'I'm an engineer, you know,' he added, awkwardly, and rose. 'Probably a little oil. Let's have a look at this same lock.'

He followed Mr Prior through the house to the church. A bright, smooth old key turned readily, and they passed into the building, musty and damp, where ivy crawled through the broken windows, and the blue sky seemed to be laid close against the holes in the roof. Another key clicked in the lock of a low door beside what had once been the Lady Chapel, a thick oak door grated back, and Mr Prior stopped a moment to light a candle that waited in its rough iron candlestick on a ledge of the stonework. Then down narrow stairs, chipped a little at the edges and soft with dust. The crypt was Norman, very simply beautiful. At the end of it was a recess, masked with a grating of rusty ironwork.

'They used to think,' said Mr Prior, 'that iron kept off witchcraft. This is the lock,' he went on, holding the candle against the gate, which was ajar.

They went through the gate, because the lock was on the other side. Desmond worked a minute or two with the oil and feather that he had brought. Then with a little wrench the key turned and re-turned.

'I think that's all right,' he said, looking up, kneeling on one knee, with the key still in the lock and his hand on it.

'May I try it?'

Mr Prior took Desmond's place, turned the key, pulled it out, and stood up. Then the key and the candlestick fell rattling on the stone floor, and the old man sprang upon Desmond.

'Now I've got you,' he growled, in the darkness, and Desmond says that his spring and his clutch and his voice were like the spring and the clutch and the growl of a strong savage beast.

Desmond's little strength snapped like a twig at his first bracing of it to resistance. The old man held him as a vice holds. He had got a rope from somewhere. He was tying Desmond's arms.

Desmond hates to know that there in the dark he screamed like a caught hare. Then he remembered that he was a man, and shouted, 'Help! Here! Help!'

But a hand was on his mouth, and now a handkerchief was being knotted at the back of his head. He was on the floor, leaning against something. Prior's hands had left him.

'Now,' said Prior's voice, a little breathless, and the match he struck showed Desmond the stone shelves with long things on them—coffins he supposed. 'Now, I'm sorry I had to do it, but science before friendship, my dear Desmond,' he went on, quite courteous and friendly. 'I will explain to you, and you will see that a man of honour could not act otherwise. Of course, you having no friends who know where you are is most convenient. I saw that from the first. Now I'll explain. I didn't expect you to understand by instinct. But no matter. I am, I say it without vanity, the greatest discoverer since Newton. I know how to modify men's natures. I can make men what I choose. It's all done by transfusion of blood. Lopez—you know, my man Lopez—I've pumped the blood of dogs into his veins, and he's my slave—like a dog. Verney, he's my slave, too—part dog's blood and partly the blood of people who've come from time to time to investigate the ghost, and partly my own, because I wanted him to be clever enough to help me. And there's a bigger thing behind all this. You'll understand me when I say'—here he became

very technical indeed, and used many words that meant nothing to Desmond, whose thoughts dwelt more and more on his small chance of escape.

To die like a rat in a hole, a rat in a hole! If he could only loosen the handkerchief and shout again!

‘Attend, can’t you?’ said Prior, savagely, and kicked him. ‘I beg your pardon, my dear chap,’ he went on, suavely, ‘but this is important. So you see the elixir of life is really the blood. The blood is the life, you know, and my great discovery is that to make a man immortal, and restore his youth, one only needs blood from the veins of a man who unites in himself blood of the four great races—the four colours, black, white, red, and yellow. Your blood unites these four. I took as much as I dared from you that night. I was the vampire, you know.’ He laughed pleasantly. ‘But your blood didn’t act. The drug I had to give you to induce sleep probably destroyed the vital germs. And, besides, there wasn’t enough of it. Now there is going to be enough!’

Desmond had been working his head against the thing behind him, easing the knot of the handkerchief down till it slipped from head to neck. Now he got his mouth free, and said, quickly:

‘That was not true what I said about the Chinamen and that. I was joking. My mother’s people were all Devon.’

‘I don’t blame you in the least,’ said Prior, quietly. ‘I should lie myself in your place.’

And he put back the handkerchief. The candle was now burning clearly from the place where it stood—on a stone coffin. Desmond could see that the long things on the shelves were coffins, not all of stone. He wondered what this madman would do with his body when everything was over. The little wound in his throat had broken out again. He could feel the slow trickle of warmth on his neck. He wondered whether he would faint. It felt like it.

‘I wish I’d brought you here the first day—it was Verney’s doing, my tinkering about with pints and half-pints. Sheer waste—sheer wanton waste!’

Prior stopped and stood looking at him.

Desmond, despairingly conscious of growing physical weakness, caught himself in a real wonder as to whether this might not be a dream—a horrible, insane dream—and he could not wholly dismiss the wonder, because incredible things seemed to be adding themselves to the real horrors of the situation, just as they do in dreams. There seemed to be something stirring in the place—something that wasn’t Prior. No—nor Prior’s shadow, either. That was black and sprawled big across the arched roof. This was white, and very small and thin. But it stirred, it grew—now it was no longer just a line of white, but a long, narrow, white wedge—and it showed between the coffin on the shelf opposite him and that coffin’s lid.

And still Prior stood very still looking down on his prey. All emotion but a dull wonder was now dead in Desmond’s weakened senses. In dreams—if one called out, one awoke—but he could not call out. Perhaps if one moved. But before he could bring his enfeebled will to the decision of movement—something else moved. The black lid of the coffin opposite rose slowly—and then suddenly fell, clattering and echoing, and from the coffin rose a form, horribly white and shrouded, and fell on Prior and rolled with him on the floor of the vault in a silent, whirling struggle. The last thing Desmond heard before he fainted in good earnest was the scream Prior uttered as he turned at the crash and saw the white-shrouded body leaping towards him.

‘It’s all right,’ he heard next. And Verney was bending over him with brandy. ‘You’re quite safe. He’s tied up and locked in the laboratory. No. That’s all right, too.’ For Desmond’s eyes had

turned towards the lidless coffin. 'That was only me. It was the only way I could think of, to save you. Can you walk now? Let me help you, so. I've opened the grating. Come.'

Desmond blinked in the sunlight he had never thought to see again. Here he was, back in his wicker chair. He looked at the sundial on the house. The whole thing had taken less than fifty minutes.

'Tell me,' said he. And Verney told him in short sentences with pauses between.

'I tried to warn you,' he said, 'you remember, in the window. I really believed in his experiments at first—and—he'd found out something about me—and not told. It was when I was very young. God knows I've paid for it. And when you came I'd only just found out what really had happened to the other chaps. That beast Lopez let it out when he was drunk. Inhuman brute! And I had a row with Prior that first night, and he promised me he wouldn't touch you. And then he did.'

'You might have told me.'

'You were in a nice state to be told anything, weren't you? He promised me he'd send you off as soon as you were well enough. And he had been good to me. But when I heard him begin about the grating and the key I knew—so I just got a sheet and—'

'But why didn't you come out before?'

'I didn't dare. He could have tackled me easily if he had known what he was tackling. He kept moving about. It had to be done suddenly. I counted on just that moment of weakness when he really thought a dead body had come to life to defend you. Now I'm going to harness the horse and drive you to the police station at Crittenden. And they'll send and lock him up. Everyone knew he was as mad as a hatter, but somebody had to be nearly killed before anyone would lock him up. The law's like that, you know.'

'But you—the police—won't they—'

'It's quite safe,' said Verney, dully. 'Nobody knows but the old man, and now nobody will believe anything he says. No, he never posted your letters, of course, and he never wrote to your friend, and he put off the Psychological man. No, I can't find Lopez; he must know that something's up. He's bolted.'

But he had not. They found him, stubbornly dumb, but moaning a little, crouched against the locked grating of the vault when they came, a prudent half-dozen of them, to take the old man away from the Haunted House. The master was dumb as the man. He would not speak. He has never spoken since.