



The House of Whispers

By William Johnston

Illustrations by Irwin Myers

"THE LITTLE PEOPLE."

Synopsis: Spalding Nelson receives an invitation to dinner from his great-uncle, Rufus Gaston. On the way he meets Barbara Bradford and renders her a service. She lives in the same apartment building as the Gastons. They get together. Gaston and his wife are going to the city to live and ask Nelson to live in their apartments. He accepts. The Gastons tell him of mysterious noises about the apartment—"whispers" and noises that have scared them. Going to the apartment a few days later Nelson again meets Barbara his accidental acquaintance. Nelson meets the building superintendent, Wick, and instinctively dislikes him. In a wall safe he finds a necklace of magnificent pearls. Next day Nelson finds the pearls have disappeared from the wall safe. His first idea of informing the police did not act upon because of peculiar circumstances. He has been discharged from his position without adequate explanation or reason, and feels himself involved in something of a mystery. He decides to conduct an investigation himself. One night Barbara signals from the window of her apartment, which is opposite his, and they arrange a meeting for next day. In the morning he finds a note in his room, asking him why he had not informed the police of the loss of the jewels. Barbara tells Nelson her sister, Claire, had been you before made a runaway marriage with an adventurer, from whom she was soon parted, and the marriage had been annulled. Claire is engaged to be married and someone knowing of her escapade has stolen documents concerning the affair from Barbara's apartment and is attempting to blackmail her. Barbara exchange confidences about the "whispers," mysterious notes and other queer doings, which are much alike in both apartments.

CHAPTER V—Continued.

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I wondered which had been his bedroom. It was hardly likely that he had occupied the room in which I slept. As I debated the matter I heard someone moving about my room and went to investigate. It was Mrs. Burke, making up my bed. She would know which room my great-uncle had been accustomed to occupy.

As I entered the bedroom for the purpose of cross-questioning her, my first impression—and philosophers tell us that the first is most likely to be the correct one—was of a simple-minded, kindly old Irish woman of the utmost honesty. I was certain just by looking at her that there wasn't a crooked hair in her head, even if she had had the intelligence necessary for crimes beyond the ordinary.

"It's Mr. Nelson I'm seeing at last," she exclaimed with satisfaction. "I was wondering when I would be laying eyes on ye."

"Yes," said I. "I am Mr. Nelson, Mr. Gaston's great-nephew."

"Sure and I'd have known ye anywhere. It's as like ye as two peas, barring the old gentleman's white hairs."

Her statement rather startled me, for while I never had regarded myself as an Adonis, on the other hand I never had supposed I looked anything like old Rufus.

"Was this my great-uncle's bedroom when he was here?" I asked, trying to make my inquiry seem casual.

"It was and it wasn't," Mrs. Burke replied. "He gets queer notions, the old gentleman does. In the last few weeks he's slept in every room in the house."

"What made him do that?"

"It's not for me to be saying," devoutly she crossed herself. "Some-



"Sometimes I Do Be Thinking the House Is Haunted."

times I do be thinking the house is haunted. The old man was all the time mumble about—"

She hesitated and looked furtively about.

"About whispers," I suggested. Instead of replying to my question she shot another one at me.

"And have ye been hearing them, too?"

I laughed, trying to put a note of merriment into my tones.

"I don't believe in things like that."

The old woman nodded her head sagely.

"It ain't believing in them things that makes you hear them. Either you hear them or you don't. The old man heard them."

"How do you know?"

" Didn't I hear him asking myself about it? He heard them, many times."

"How about the others—the servants—did they hear them, too?"

"They may have that. Niggers is

Then, too, there was my own unexpected and unwanted discharge at my place of business. I was positive in some way it was connected with my having come to this place to live. Had my great-uncle himself brought it about for the purpose of discrediting me? Was it the work of the black mailers to get square with me for having accidentally butted in on the meeting they had arranged with Miss Bradford?

The scar-faced man! Who was he? I was certain that he was in some way involved. It might have been he who had caused me to lose my job. Certainly the malevolent glance he had given me in the restaurant that night showed that he would have wrought me harm if he could. The next time I laid eyes on him I was determined to trail him with bulldog tenacity until I ascertained his identity and where he lived. I felt sure that the trail would lead to his door.

I decided not to leave the apartment all day. I had laid in a plentiful supply of food the day before so there was no necessity for going out.

"Did Mrs. Gaston ever speak to you about it?"

"She did and she did not. She never in so many words asked me if I heard them. All she says to me was, 'Nora, if you ever see or hear anything strange or unusual here, you're to let me know at once.' And I says, 'Yis, Mrs. Gaston, I will.'"

"And have you ever seen or heard anything?"

The old woman hustled herself with making up the bed for a moment before she answered me.

"I'm not saying I've seen anything," she began, "but there's things I could be telling if I was minded to open my lips."

"If you know anything," I said, "you must tell me. Mr. Gaston put me here to find out what was wrong."

"There's no doubt there's wrong here."

"What makes you say that? What have you seen? What do you know?"

"It's neither what I've seen nor what I know." She nodded mysteriously. "It's what I've been hearing myself."

"For heaven's sake, woman," I cried, losing patience, "what is it you've heard?"

"I've heard them walking," she announced with an air of triumph.

"You've heard who walking?"

"The little people, of course. Who else would it be doing it?"

"Oh, bosh!" I exclaimed. I was well enough acquainted with the superstitions of the Irish to understand who she meant by "the little people." It's the habit of the old crones from the Emerald Isle to attribute anything they cannot understand to fairies.

"You may laugh," she retorted indignantly, "but I heard them, I tell ye."

"Where did you hear them, these footsteps?"

"Coming right out of the wall, here in this room, and in the kitchen, beyond."

"It was probably somebody in another apartment you heard."

"It was not. The floors do be deadened like, and it's nothing at all you can hear. It was somebody walking soft-like right there in the wall at the back."

"Well," I announced, "if there is anything like that going on, I am going to stay here until I hear it. I want to make sure no one can come into the apartment but myself, so I am going to ask you to give me your key. I'll be home here all the morning, so I can let you in when you ring."

"It's me key you're wanting, is it?"

She produced it from a pocket of her gown and handed it over, first unknotting it from a corner of her kerchief where she had tied it for safe keeping.

"And indeed if it's myself you're not trusting with a key after Mrs. Gaston letting me have it for these ten years back, it's your own bed you can be making. I'll not be coming near the place again."

In fine indignation she flounced out of the place. To tell the truth I was not sorry that she had announced her decision not to return. Whilst my impression of her was that she was a simple-minded old woman of uttermost honesty, I was just as well satisfied that no one but myself should have entry to the apartment until I had finished my investigations and had made further progress in solving the mysteries that were so rapidly developing.

Left once more to myself, I sat down at my great-uncle's desk and made out a list of questions that must be answered:

1. Where was Rufus Gaston? Had the old gentleman really gone away or was he in hiding in the building?

2. Who had removed the Gaston pearls from the wall safe? It must be someone who knew the combination.

3. Who had written the note I found on the floor of my bedroom? How and when had it been placed on the floor?

4. Who were the persons who were trying to blackmail the family next door?

5. How had the anonymous notes been delivered on the floor of Barbara Bradford's room? (Evidently the note was the same as in my case.)

6. Was there anything in the past relations of Mr. Bradford and my great-uncle that would cause my great-uncle to plot against the Bradford family?

7. How were the mysterious sounds heard both by my great-uncle, by Barbara Bradford, and by myself to be accounted for?

8. How were the mysterious footprints heard by Mrs. Burke to be explained? Were they merely the imaginings of a superstitious old woman?

The relations between Mr. Bradford and Rufus Gaston puzzled me. Miss Bradford's recollection of her father's remark about my great-uncle certainly indicated that he held no high opinion of him. My great-uncle's actions throughout had been peculiar. He suddenly sending for me and insisting on my coming here to live, his insistence on leaving his wife's jewels in my care, and on entrusting me with the combination of the safe, all now took on a sinister aspect. It certainly was peculiar that he had gone off without leaving me any address where he could be reached.

"How strange!" I muttered, more to

myself than to her. "I wonder if it could be anyone walking in their sleep."

"You mean—" she hesitated—"my sister?"

"I don't mean anyone," I hastened to say. "I was only thinking aloud. I have heard of innocent persons doing all sorts of things under hypnotic influence."

"I've read of that, too," she said soberly. "I wonder—"

She left the sentence unfinished, but I felt that the same thought had flashed into her mind as into mine. Was it possible that the unscrupulous Frenchman who had wronged her sister years ago had in some way recently gained an interview with her and had gotten her once more into his power? Could it be that under the spell of another's mind Claire Bradford herself had taken away the papers concerning her and was placing the notes in the blackmail plot?

"Look here," I said determinedly, "we've got to see each other some where tomorrow and talk this over. Where can we meet?"

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"'Nora, if you ever see or hear anything strange or unusual here, you're to let me know at once.' And I says, 'Yis, Mrs. Gaston, I will.'"

"And have you ever seen or heard anything?"

The old woman hustled herself with making up the bed for a moment before she answered me.

"Never that I've heard tell of, but how should I know? This is the only place in the house that I work."

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