

the goal is scarce twenty-five yards from them. On they come, breast to breast, Percy full flushed but composed, Eugene with swollen veins and panting breath. Now Percy breaks away from him: one foot, two——

"Come on, Percy, run away from him," cried Frank.

With another spurt, Percy comes on, graceful and swift—a second later he is at the post with his companion some ten feet behind.

There were more races and other contests of skill, which I omit for the reason that graver matters are coming.

The quiet tenor of school-life is to be broken upon by a certain train of adventures which are so strange and improbable that, in looking back upon them, I sometimes fancy that they are such things as dreams are made of, not realities of life. The shadow cast upon my early years by my uncle's murder had not yet wholly lifted, as I was very shortly to find. The reader will see that the mystery is to give some hope—whether true or false, later events will show—of being solved; and so, leaving the pretty lake, and innocent Rose, and kind Mr. Scarborough, and all the natural beauties of our vacation resort, I invite the reader to a change of scene.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN WHICH TOM AND I SPEND A NIGHT IN THE "HAUNTED HOUSE," AND IN WHICH I MEET WITH AN EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURE.

"YES, Tom, that's Tower Hill Mansion," and I pointed to the gloomy abode which had been my uncle's.

It was the twilight of August 16th. Tom and I were seated in a barouche, hired for the occasion, and rapidly nearing the house whose horrid memories had so important an influence on my life.

"It doesn't look any too cheerful in the gloaming," Tom observed. "What an awful racket those crows are making!" There was a number of these ugly black birds hovering in mid-air, uttering their raucous cries above the house, and very strange and eery they looked in the dying of the day. To my excited imagination they seemed to be incorporate spirits from another world—spirits of bloodshed and robbery and murder, gloating over a mansion consecrated to their darling rites.

We dismissed the driver at the gate, bidding him return for us at six the next morning.

On reaching the massive, gloomy door I put down my valise, and opening it produced a heavy bunch of keys. They were quite rusty.

"Those keys look worse haunted than the house," observed Tom.

"They haven't been used in years, Tom," and I proceeded to fit the heaviest of the keys in the lock. In inserting it, not without difficulty, I shook the door in its frame. Forthwith there came a series

of flapping noises within that sent my heart thumping against my ribs. I drew back with a start and would have fallen down the steps had not Tom caught me.

The noises continued within, and it was on my lips to beg Tom to give up what I considered his romantic idea.

"Cheer up, old boy," said Tom, in his heartiest tones. "Ghosts don't shake themselves in that style. I've got some holy water along; it's a good thing to have in a house whether it's haunted or not, you know, and then we've both got canes. Are you ready to unlock the door?"

"Yes; but I'm a little afraid."

"All right. Just wait till I get a good hold on my cane."

Tom grasped his cane at the lighter end, and raised it in such a position that he could strike at once.

"Now, old boy, make the sign of the cross and open that door."

I crossed myself and turned the key in the lock; whereupon the noises within, which had subsided while we were talking, were again renewed.

"Don't mind the racket, Harry; when you shove the door open, jump aside."

As I sent the door swinging ajar the hinges growled and grated, sounds not entirely dissimilar to the voice of him who had been their owner, while the flapping noises grew louder and quicker. You may be sure that I did not neglect to follow Tom's advice.

Tom, however, moved neither to one side nor the other; but, standing full in the doorway, strained

his eyes in an endeavor to read the secret of the noises within the dark hall. For some moments he stood listening intently; then an expression of relief came upon his features.

"Bats!" he said. "There's been a window or something left open, and they've taken charge of the hall. Now get out your lamp and we'll go in, this side up with care."

We lighted our lamp and entered. I shivered as I crossed the threshold. The air within had the uncanny chillness of a deserted house upon it. The bats fluttered over us and around us, and certainly did not help to put me at my ease, although Tom changed not a muscle.

"Let's give the bats a chance," said Tom, in his usual tone, as he threw the door wide open and raised the window. Presently he added: "Suppose we take a look at the library. This is it, isn't it?"

And Tom laid his hand on the door. I remembered it well; and as I entered I almost expected to see the grim figure of my uncle, seated at his desk, and peering at me over his spectacles. It was the same dark room; darker, gloomier, dustier. As we entered, a rat scudded across the floor into its hole. There was dust on everything; dust on the straight-backed chairs, dust on the solemn lines of volumes, dust upon the floor, which gave our every footfall a muffled voice, warning us to leave unexplored this horrid home of dark-brooding silence.

"Let's get out of here," I said faintly.

Tom did not seem to share my impression, for he gave a very close imitation of a Tom-cat at his best (for the benefit of the rats, I presume), and, before leading the way into the hall, traced his name

with his finger upon the dust-covered table. As we were passing by the door we noticed hanging over it a clock of medium size. It had stopped at twelve.

"I wonder how long ago that clock stopped?" said Tom. "And was it midnight or midday?" I asked myself.

"Look at that clock in the hall!" exclaimed Tom, as we made our way out. "Well, if this doesn't beat the world! It's stopped at twelve, too."

I felt as though some one had thrown a bucket of ice-water down my back. The coincidence startled me. Who of us has not heard the popular superstition to the effect that a clock stops at the moment its owner is murdered? It came upon me very vividly that my uncle, for all we knew, had met his awful fate at midnight.

I was somewhat relieved, subsequently, by discovering that other clocks in the house had stopped with the register of quite a variety of hours and minutes. The large hall-clock seemed to have a strange interest for my companion. He peered into it, examined it on every side, and, as it was over six feet high, procured a chair to examine its top.

"There's dust here half an inch thick," he said, and he brought out his handkerchief and was about to remove the layer, when he changed his purpose.

"This is Aunt Jane's handkerchief, and she's awful particular about her dry-goods."

Instead of dusting the top, therefore, Tom contented himself with inscribing his name with his forefinger on top of the clock.

"Fools' names and fools' faces——" I began.

"Are always seen in public places, but never on

top of clocks," retorted Tom. "So," he continued, after we had ascended the stairs and were looking down the gloomy length of the gloomy, long corridor, veiled in the gathering gloom of night, "this is the floor where you spent the night. Where's your room? Let's take that in first."

I led him to the end of the corridor, and opened the door of the corner room. How that fearful awakening came back to me! My own scream of agony again rang in my ears. As Tom placed the lamp on the table I gave a slight cry.

"Look! look! the bed, just as I left it. There's the coverlet and the sheet thrown back exactly as I turned them when I awoke and sprang from the bed, in dismay at finding that Mrs. Raynor had disappeared. Look!" I continued, pointing to a dark stain on the floor.

"What's that, Harry?"

"The stain of blood! my uncle's blood! and here's the same black mark upon the pillow-slip."

Even Tom showed signs of emotion. He quickly mastered it, however, and said: "Let's clear out of this room; we've seen enough. Now for your uncle's bedchamber."

We proceeded thither, where, to my relief, there was no striking sign of the tragedy. The bed was made, the room clean, saving, of course, the covering of dust upon everything.

"Now," continued Tom, placing the lamp upon a table, "here's where we're going to pass the night." At that moment I wondered what madness had seized me to consent to this foolhardy enterprise.

"If your uncle's ghost," pursued my dauntless

friend serenely, "is allowed to wander at all, he'll be very likely to come in here."

It is easy enough to talk about ghosts in broad daylight, but to discuss the probability of a murdered man's spirit coming or not coming at night, and in the room where the man had been murdered, is an exhibition of daring in a small boy as rare as it is remarkable.

Tom saw dismay upon my face. He laughed and added:

"Well, we've got to keep distracted for awhile, or maybe we'll find out that we've got nerves. Suppose, Harry, we say our beads to begin on; I haven't said mine to-day. I don't know how it is with you, but the beads make me brave every time."

"It's a good idea," I answered.

Together we recited the five decades and concluded with the litany of Loretto.

"Now," said Tom, looking at his watch, "it's in order to take lunch."

And Tom opened the valise and placed upon a table a flask of cider, sandwiches, cakes, fruits, cold chicken, and a number of such things as boys at our age are wont to favor.

The reader may be astonished, not so much at our volunteering to pass a night in a haunted house as at the fact that our elders should have allowed us to carry out so madcap a scheme. And, indeed, had it not been for an accident our plan would have been early nipped in the bud.

For on my first proposing the matter to my father he had shown marked disapproval. However, when I told him of all that Tom had said concerning the mystery he had become lost in thought.

"Now, father, won't you please let us go?" I asked.

"I'll go myself," was the answer. "It will be no harm to try the plan. Of course, there's no question of the house being haunted; that's a bit of superstition. But there are some things worth looking up there in regard to your uncle's death, and if one goes there one can hardly help staying all night. You ought to know now, my dear Harry," continued my father, "that it was chiefly on your account I gave up the pursuit of Mrs. Raynor."

"On my account, father?"

"Yes; for it seemed to me that were we to succeed in bringing to justice the woman whom you had loved as a mother your life would become somewhat embittered. But now that old feelings have been softened by time, and that you are a strong, healthy, cheerful boy, it might be good to stir up farther inquiries. Tom Playfair's suggestion, though romantic, may have something of good in it. Yes; I'll pass a night at Tower Hill Mansion myself."

"But won't you let Tom and me come along, father?"

"Boys are best in bed at night."

"But we can sleep there, you know, and if anything happens you can wake us up."

"Well, on that condition you may come along."

Whereupon I hastened off to indite a note to Tom, telling him of my father's decision and pressing him to come on at once.

But before the letter could have reached Tom my father had an ugly fall from his horse. His hip was injured, and the doctor declared that it would

be madness for him to think of moving about for weeks. When Tom came upon the scene my father easily gave in to our pleadings; and so it was that two hours after my friend's arrival we had taken the train *en route* for my uncle's former dwelling.

We dispatched our lunch very pleasantly, though I noticed with concern that Tom was beginning to yawn. The meal, all the same, gave me heart of grace, and I entered into conversation with Tom in really good spirits. But as mine rose Tom's seemed to fall. As I became talkative he grew taciturn. True, he opened his mouth frequently, but only to gape or to excuse himself. His eyes, too, had become heavy.

"Are you sleepy, Tom?"

"Awful; what a dunce I was not to have taken a nap while we were journeying here. You see, old fellow, I can stand a lot, but two nights in succession without sleep is more than I can go through decently."

"Two nights!" I repeated. "What was the matter last night? Didn't you take a Pullman sleeper?"

"Yes; but a baby took it too. The baby might have taken the smoker and smoked. It would have succeeded in smoking just as well as it did in sleeping, and it wouldn't have been so much of a nuisance. It made night hideous."

For a few moments the conversation dragged. On taking out my watch, I found that it wanted a quarter to eleven. I was about to communicate the fact to him, when I discovered that he was nodding.

"Tom," I said in all the bravery I had plucked up, "you're worn out for want of a little sleep. You've been travelling all day. It's now a quarter

to eleven. An hour's rest would make a new man of you."

"Will you call me before twelve?" murmured Tom, without opening his eyes.

"Yes. Here, come over to the bed."

I helped him across the room and was about to assist him into the bed, when he threw himself on a chair standing at the head, and burying his face in his arms and his arms upon the pillow, fell asleep at once.

And now, before I proceed any further with my account, I desire to warn the reader that from the moment of Tom's falling asleep to his awakening I tell the events as I then honestly thought they occurred.

I returned to the table then, and looked around the room; everything was in perfect order. I listened; nothing but the quiet breathings of my sleeping friend broke upon the silence.

Then making the sign of the cross, I took out of my valise—the "Pickwick Papers." I had brought this book as a special counter-irritant to any feelings of depression. I regarded it as a book which would bring sunshine into a desert. I selected for my reading that very curious chapter where Mr. Samuel Weller writes a valentine. During a quarter of an hour's reading I felt no nervousness at all. A little after eleven it occurred to me in a dim way that my head was becoming heavy. Presently I discovered that I was nodding, and even in the act my imagination had wandered from "Samivel" and his father and was dwelling upon those two clocks which had stopped at twelve o'clock.

"Why did they stop at twelve?"

I stared about me, alarmed by the sound my own voice had made.

"This won't do," I muttered, and I arose and took a turn about the room. In doing so I passed quite near Tom and laid my hand gently upon his hair. He had not stirred from the position in which he had fallen asleep—face buried in his hands, his hands pressed upon the pillow.

Feeling more wakeful, I again composed myself to read; and for ten or twelve minutes got on quite nicely. But once more I began to grow heavy. Shaking off the feeling, I took a glance at my watch, which was lying before me on the table. It was twenty minutes to twelve.

"In five minutes I'll call Tom," was my reflection as I resumed my volume.

It seems to me that after reading two pages and a half I caught myself nodding again; and I think that I half formed a resolution to jump to my feet and take a turn about the room. After this there was a blank.

Suddenly I started to my feet with a gasp and listened intently.

There was a loud whirring noise and my hair seemed to stand on end as I listened. Even in this state of alarmed expectancy I took up my watch and glanced at it. It marked twelve to the minute. As I was still gazing upon its face, the watch fell from my nerveless grasp to the floor, when upon a sudden every clock in the house began to strike.

One, two, three—

I could clearly distinguish the deep tone of the hall clock.

Four, five, six—

I wondered whether they would go to twelve.

Seven, eight, nine.

Ten, eleven, twelve.

Then there succeeded a deathly silence, and on the moment a cold shivering came upon me. I turned to wake Tom. I made for the bed calling "Tom!"

What was it that froze the word upon my lips? I could not see Tom. Between him and myself there stood a sort of veil, a mist.

I stood rooted to the spot, and as I paused, chain-bound in an agony of fright, the lamp at my side began to grow dimmer and dimmer while the mist became more and more luminous, more and more defined, more and more clear-cut, till, as the lamp sputtered out its life, the mist was no longer a mist but a luminous shadow—yet far more than a shadow. There was no doubt to my mind that I was standing before the ghost of James Dee.

"Uncle!" I gasped.

"Nephew," came a hollow, sepulchral voice from that weird form, yet carrying in its hollow, sepulchral tones a hint of the old harshness. His face was still gloomy and heavy, stern and unrelenting—as it had been when I met him for the first time in the library—but it wore also the look of terror and agony which had fastened upon it in his last moments. I could now clearly see Tom behind, and through this strange apparition. He was still motionless. Was he alive? I called to him with all my force.

"Tom! Tom!"

But though my lips went through all the motions of speech, no sound followed. It was as though I had not spoken. My uncle, meanwhile, stood gazing

at me with his harsh frown and his stern eyes. I could stand the suspense no longer.

"Uncle," I cried, "why do you appear to me thus?"

"Nephew! when did you see me last?"

"Here, uncle—on that sad Christmas eve."

"What did I do for you that night?"

"You made a will leaving me all your property."

"What happened to me that night?"

"You were murdered in your bed."

"Has the murder been avenged?"

"Not yet, uncle."

"Are you taking any measures to have it avenged?"

"No, uncle."

Oh! how I trembled beneath his searching glance.

"Nephew, listen: swear that you will take *reasonable* measures to have my murder avenged—*reasonable* measures. You are not bound to anything extraordinary. Do you understand?"

"Yes, uncle."

"Then lift up your right hand and say 'I swear.'"

I complied, and even as I spoke the lamp sputtered again, the light rose higher and higher; my uncle's figure became ill-defined and featureless, then resolved itself into a mist, till, as the lamp gave forth its normal light, I was alone. I sank back into my chair and my eyes closed. In a moment I was again on my feet, and with two strides was beside my friend.

Clutching him by the shoulder—

"Tom! Tom!" I cried.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN WHICH THE HALL CLOCK TELLS A STORY.

"HALLO! What's the matter?" cried Tom, jumping to his feet and rubbing his eyes.

"Is it twelve?"

"O Tom!"

I could say no more, but clinging to him, sobbed like a little child.

Tom glanced at me anxiously and took out his watch. "Four minutes past twelve," he exclaimed.

"Tell me what's happened, Harry. You needn't be afraid. If you've seen a ghost you're better off than most people."

"Tom, I've seen my uncle!"

"You did? Tell me everything from the time I went to sleep till now."

With no little incoherence I gave him a full account of my adventure. Tom was certainly astonished. At several points he was surprised, and was very particular in inquiring into the exact words my uncle used. These words and my answers he insisted on my repeating over and over again, and he seemed to find an import in them beyond what was on the surface.

"Hallo! What's this, Harry?" he exclaimed suddenly as he stooped to the floor and picked up my watch. "Why, here's more mystery. Your watch has stopped at twelve to the minute. There's a coincidence."

"Yes; but it can be explained," I answered. "I dropped my watch at twelve, and most probably the shock of the fall stopped it."