

Scarlet Runners

By James S. Pyke-Nott

THIS is the story of a house—its history.

It was a well-kept house when first I knew it, big—for a house of this kind—and very imposing ; and it was very commonly said that many persons would give their eyes to possess it. But the persons who were thus talked about never thought of it as a house at all ; and they couldn't have got inside it, even if they had wished to get there, which they never thought of wishing ; so it is difficult to understand why they wanted it, for as a mere ornament it was too large and too unmanageable. I speak of it simply as a house, because I am trying to be charitable, and I believe that up to the very last it was a comfortable place to live in—very safe, and always well stored with provisions. I will tell about those who lived in it after I have explained what a really wonderful house it was, for then its inmates will be less surprising. It could move, even when not on wheels, and frequently did so move ; and once it moved astonishingly fast—and I will tell about that too in a little while. Yes, it was wonderfully built : what wonderful machinery it had ! and how wonderfully the machinery kept in order !

This house, like all houses of its kind, was haunted. It did not look haunted, very few houses that are in good repair do ; for ghosts

ghosts have many affectations, and with them it is unfashionable to appear in houses that are not dilapidated : also many of them are shy, and some are proud, and others are sleepy, so, when a house comes alongside another house, their ghosts as a rule sit quite still and content themselves with listening to the conversation of the houses. But those whom the stories are mostly told about are of course the more eager and restless spirits, who can be seen looking out through the windows of their houses, and are often accompanied by strange lights. Some of these are affectionate ghosts, who long to know their fellow ghosts, and to be understood by them ; and many sad stories are told about these ghosts.

It is pleasant to sit and talk of ghosts. None of our stern wise elders can come and vex us with certificated knowledge : we get to know each other, and that is a great matter, and a very difficult matter, for generations of wise men have constructed cases for us, and written out labels to be stuck on us, and classified all our thoughts ; and wise men of the present come round and say, "Ah, yes ; this is a thing we thoroughly understand." And that is hateful, and it is absurd ; for we are really ghosts—we are like those of whom I have spoken, of whom the sad stories are told.

We will talk no more of ghosts, or we shall sleep less soundly than we ought to sleep—and I promised to tell about the inmates of this haunted house. They were not at all troubled by their ghost ; but then they were many, and they spent all their time in dancing. I never knew exactly how many they were, it would not have been easy to count them. Night and day they danced down the corridors and up the passages, and through a hall where a wonderful machine beat out the time for them, and seized them as they approached and whirled them round and sent them off again

again down the corridors, and that was great fun. It was never very light in any part of the dwelling—if that could be called a dwelling where nobody dwelt for an instant, for these people even slept dancing—but they could see each other quite well, for they were all dressed in scarlet.

They must have been fond of dancing, and certainly there was plenty of company, but I think they found it monotonous, for whenever they found a crack in the walls they at once forced their way out into the open, although they always died immediately. But these sad occurrences were rare, for, as I have said, this was an unusually safe house to live in ; it was quite distressed when it saw its inmates rush out and die, and so it did its very best to keep from being injured.

One day a great battle was fought between the houses of two neighbouring countries, and soon so much smoke arose that it became difficult to see what was going on ; but the matter did not end in smoke, for many houses were destroyed, and many were grievously damaged. And this house was present at the first : and this is the story I promised to tell. Perhaps it could not help being present, and certainly as soon as the hostile houses hove in sight it thought of its inmates and the danger into which it was bringing them ; but it did not fully realise the cruelty of remaining where it was until the approaching houses began to open fire, and then it determined to remain there no longer. Yes, it had wonderful machinery ! It was a splendid house to live in.

Nevertheless these bright little dancers come to a woeful and untimely end. Years went by and they still danced on in safety, but danger often lurked outside now ; and their house outside looked less and less desirable—nobody wished to possess it any longer. And one day there was a violent jerk and then some of
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the passages became blocked, and then the company began to crowd upon each other. The measure died out: silence and stillness settled throughout the place; the dancers rested in crushed heaps.

Their house had been hanged.