

The Old House

by W. W. Jacobs

A haunted house?" said Jack Barnes. He smiled. "There is no such thing as a haunted house."

Jack was talking to Lester, Fred, and William. The men were eating lunch at the Mayfair Inn. All four had spent the morning hiking. Every summer they met to hike. They always hiked for two weeks in the countryside.

Lester said, "That house on the hill is haunted."

"There is no such thing as a haunted house," Jack said.

"But people have died in that house," said Fred.

"Of course people have died in the house," said Jack. "People have died in lots of houses."

"How can you explain the noises?" asked William. "The people in the village say they hear strange noises coming from the house."

"Bah!" said Jack. He bit into his sandwich. "Just the wind in the chimney. Just mice in the attic."

Lester suddenly said, "I'll bet you twenty dollars you won't spend the night there alone! I bet you're afraid to spend the night there alone!"



"I'll bet you twenty dollars too!" added William.

"Well," Jack said softly. "I don't believe in ghosts. Still, I wouldn't want to spend the night there alone."

"Why not?" asked Lester. "Afraid of the wind in the chimney?"

"Afraid of the mice in the attic?" said William.

"No," Jack said. "I just wouldn't like to spend a night in that house alone."

"Suppose we *all* go?" William said suddenly. "We could leave after dinner. We'd get to the house around eleven at night. We've been hiking for a week without an adventure. That will be something new, at least."

"I don't know," said Jack.

"Afraid?" asked Lester.

"All right, then," said Jack. "We'll leave after dinner."

There was little light from the moon, and the sky was cloudy. The road was dark. The men **stumbled** often on the rocky path.

"The house should be somewhere just ahead," said William.

"No. It's still farther on," said Fred.

"That old house will be dark at night," said Jack. "You didn't forget to bring candles, did you, Lester?"

"I brought two," said Lester. "That was all that they had at the inn."

The men walked on for a while without talking. Then they saw the old house. It was on top of a hill. Tall, thick **shrubs** grew around the house. There was a graveyard nearby. The men looked at it, then walked very quickly around the graveyard.

"There are windows in the back," said Lester. "We can get in the house that way."

"No. Let's try the front door," said William. He stepped forward. Then he banged his fists loudly against the door.

"Stop playing games," said Jack. "You know that there's no one inside the house."

"I guess all the ghosts are asleep," said William. He laughed. "But don't worry. I'll wake them up." He banged on the door again. Then he suddenly cried out as the door slowly opened.

"Why, it was open all the time," he said, surprised.

"I don't believe it was open," said Fred. He looked worried.

"It *must* have been," said Lester. "I've got a candle. Who has a match?"

"I do," said Jack. He struck a match and lighted the candle. Then Lester led the way into the house.

"Somebody shut the door," said William. "There's a bit of a breeze. The candle will go out."

"It *is* shut," said Fred, looking behind him.

"Who shut it?" asked William. "Who came in last?"

"I did," said Jack. "I don't remember shutting the door. But it is possible that I did."

Lester moved slowly. He held the candle in front of him. The other men followed. They looked all around.

Shadows danced on the walls. Shadows jumped around the corners. Shadows and darkness **surrounded** the men.

"Look," said Lester. "There's a staircase ahead." Slowly they started to climb up the steps.

"Be careful!" warned Lester when they got to the top. "Part of the railing is missing up here." He held out the candle. The men saw that part of the railing was gone. They looked through the open space to the floor down below.

"Perhaps someone slipped and fell through the railing," said Lester.

"Or perhaps he was *pushed* over the side," William whispered.

"Don't talk that way!" cried Fred. "This house is scary enough without talking that way!"

Lester opened the door to a small, square room. "Let's rest here," he said.



He set down the candle.

The men seated themselves on the floor. Fred opened the bag. He took out a bottle of water and four paper cups.

"Wait! Do you hear that!" cried Jack.

"What is it?" said Fred. "Do you hear someone coming?"

Jack said, "I don't believe in ghosts. But I thought I heard a door open below. I thought I heard footsteps outside on the stairs."

"Well, well, well," Lester said. "You don't believe in—"

He suddenly stopped as the light went out. The men jumped to their feet. They stood there in the darkness.

"It's only the candle," said William. "The candle went out."

Jack struck a match. He lighted the candle again.

"Quiet!" said Fred. "I thought—I thought I heard someone talking outside."

Jack said, "I'm getting tired of this game. I keep hearing things too. It's just my imagination, I know. But this place sure is creepy."

Jack got up. He walked to the half-closed door and listened.

"Afraid?" said Lester. "Afraid to go outside?"

Jack sat down. "There can't *really* be anything out there," he said. "But we *did* hear noises. What do you think, Fred?"

Fred did not answer.

"Why, he's asleep," William said. "Wake up, Fred!" shouted William. "*Wake up, I say!*"

But Fred did not move. He sat with his back against the wall. His head was bowed. His eyes were tightly shut.

Lester turned to the others. "He sleeps like the dead," he said.

"Nonsense!" said Jack. "He's just tired from hiking. He needs some fresh air. Let's carry him outside. Lester, you take his legs. I'll take his arms. William, you can hold the candle and lead the way. Okay, Lester. You take his legs. *Lester!—Lester!*"

But it was too late. Lester's face was buried in his arms. He had rolled over on the floor. He was fast asleep.

"We must get out of here *now!*" said William. His voice was shaking.

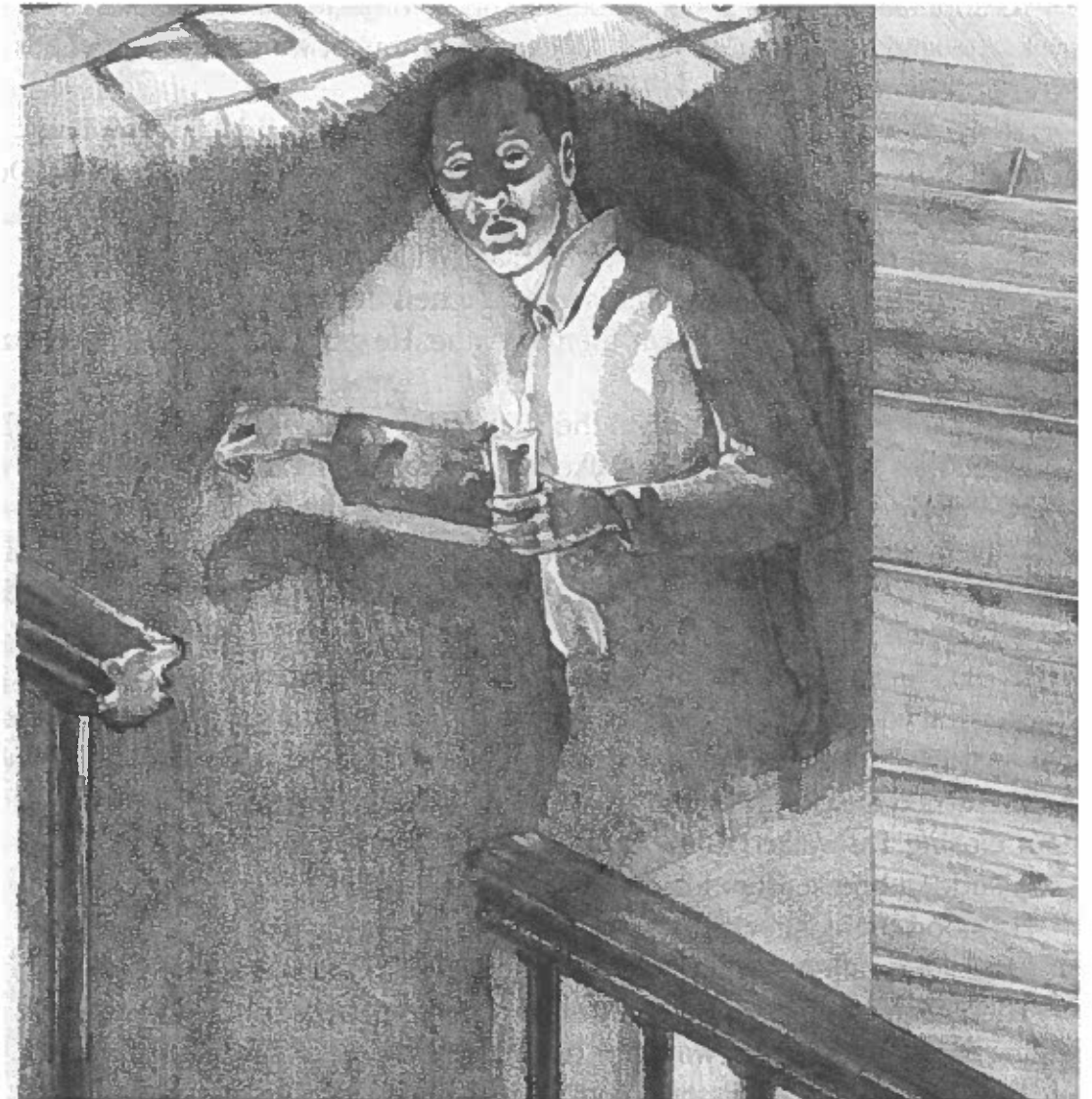
"But we can't leave them here!" said Jack.

"We must!" urged William. "Quickly! Come!"

Jack turned toward the door. Suddenly he heard a noise. William had slipped to the floor and was fast asleep.

Jack did not move. By the light of the candle he saw the three sleeping men. Jack listened. He thought he heard a noise outside.

"Who's there?" he shouted.



The noise suddenly stopped.

Jack walked to the door and stepped out into the hall. He no longer felt afraid.

"Come on!" he yelled. "Come on! Show your faces!"

Jack walked down the hall.

As soon as Jack was gone, William jumped to his feet. "That was a good trick," he said to Lester and Fred. "Jack really thought we were asleep. Let's go after him now."

There was no answer from Lester and Fred. William said, "Stop fooling around! Stop making believe that you're asleep! *Lester! Fred!* Do you hear! Do you hear!"

The men did not answer. "All right," said William. "Play your games!"

William stood for a few seconds and watched the men. The silence was terrible. He could not even hear them breathe. He grabbed the candle. Then he went out into the hall.

He heard footsteps coming up the stairs. The candle shook in his hand. The footsteps stopped. William walked a little way along the hall. Then he heard the footsteps again. They were running down the stairs.

William walked to the railing. He saw the part that had been torn away. He looked down into the blackness below. Then, he slowly and **cautiously** made his way down the stairs.

"Jack!" he called. "Are you there, Jack?"

Shaking with fright, he reached the bottom of the steps. He looked, with fear, into empty rooms. Then, suddenly, he heard footsteps behind him.

He turned and followed them slowly. By the light of the candle he saw a door closing. He walked to the door. He threw it open.

A sudden breeze from inside blew out the candle!

He stood there, shocked.

"Jack!" he called out. "It's me! It's William!"

There was no answer. He stood staring into darkness. But he had the feeling that someone was watching him.

Then he heard the footsteps again. They were climbing up the stairs.

Slowly he moved toward the stairs. He could see better in the darkness now. He saw the stairs. He began to climb them.

He reached the top of the steps. He saw a figure disappear in the shadows. William began to follow the sound of the footsteps.

"Jack!" he called.

Something moved in the darkness. It was coming closer to him.

"Jack?" yelled William. "Is that *you*—Jack?"

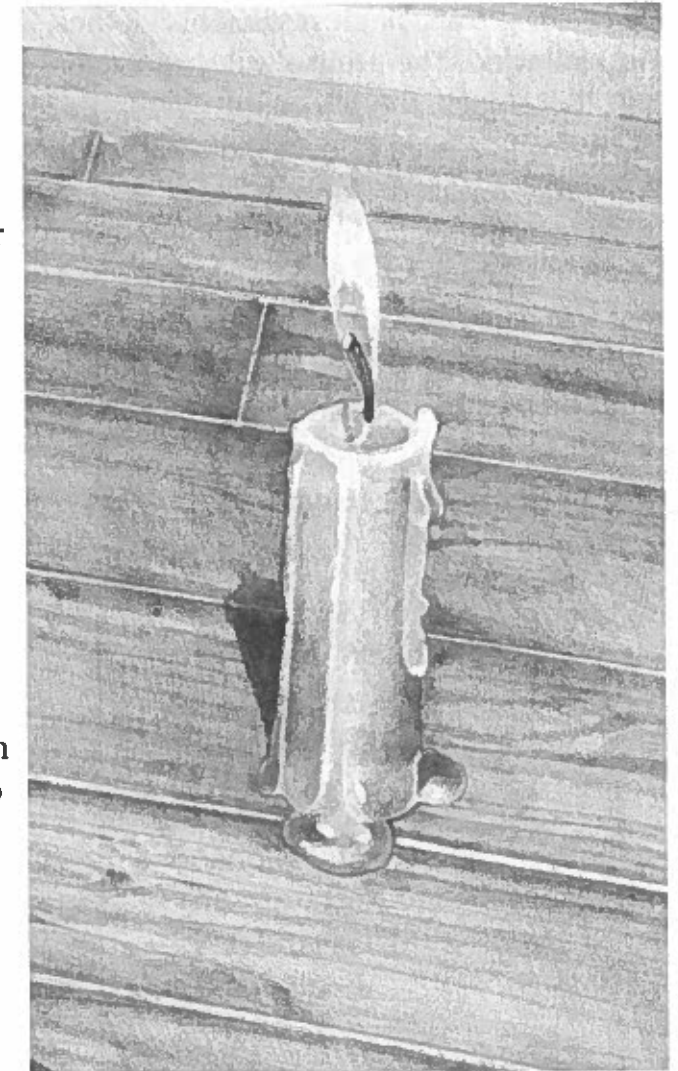
The figure did not answer. Closer and closer it came. William turned. He began to run down the hall. If he could get to the staircase! If he could reach the front door!

William ran faster. But something was running after him! It was right behind him! William jumped to the side to let it pass. Then he suddenly seemed to fall off the earth and out into space.

Lester awoke in the morning. He saw sunlight shining into the room. Fred was just getting up.

"Where are the others?" asked Lester.

"Gone, I guess," said Fred. "We must have been asleep."



Lester got up. He dusted off his clothes. Then he walked out into the hall. Fred followed. Their noise woke up a figure who had been lying asleep in the hall. It was Jack.

"Why, I've been asleep," he said, surprised. Jack looked around. "Where's William?" he asked. Nobody knew.

"That's funny. I don't remember coming out here into the hall."

"Bad place to take a nap," said Lester. He pointed to the part of the railing that was gone. "Another few feet and you might have gone over the edge."

Lester walked over to the railing and looked down. He cried out. The other men came near. All three stood staring down at the dead man below.



LOOKING FOR FACTS IN THE STORY.
How well can you find facts in a story? Put an x in the box next to the right answer.

- Every summer the men hiked for
 a. two weeks.
 b. a month.
 c. two months.
- Fred opened a bag and took out
 a. a sandwich.
 b. a bottle of water.
 c. some candles.
- Jack fell asleep
 a. on the stairs.
 b. in the kitchen.
 c. in the hall.
- At the end of the story, the men saw
 a. a ghost.
 b. some mice.
 c. a dead man.

x 5 =
NUMBER CORRECT YOUR SCORE

EXAMINING VOCABULARY WORDS.
Here are four vocabulary questions. Put an x in the box next to the right answer. The vocabulary words are printed in **boldface** in the story. You may look back at the words before you answer the questions.

- Since it was dark, the men stumbled on the path. The word **stumbled** means
 a. laughed.
 b. jumped.
 c. fell.
- Tall, thick shrubs grew around the house. What are **shrubs**?
 a. bushes
 b. flowers
 c. gates
- Shadows surrounded the men. The word **surrounded** means
 a. attacked.
 b. helped.
 c. were around.
- He slowly and cautiously walked down the steps. The word **cautiously** means
 a. happily.
 b. carefully.
 c. suddenly.

x 5 =
NUMBER CORRECT YOUR SCORE

ADDING WORDS TO A PARAGRAPH. Complete the paragraph below. Fill in each blank with one of the words in the box. Each word appears in the story. There are five words and four blanks, so one word in the box will not be used.

Every year thousands of _____¹ go on hiking trips. Some trips last for several _____² or even months. But it is also _____³ to hike for just an hour or two. If you enjoy walking and fresh air, you will probably like _____⁴.

weeks people dark
possible hiking

x 5 =
NUMBER CORRECT YOUR SCORE

READING BETWEEN THE LINES. These questions will help you think critically. You will have to think about what happened in the story, and then figure out the answers. Put an x in the box next to the right answer.

- At the end of the story, William
 - a. died.
 - b. joked with the other men.
 - c. went home.
- We may infer (figure out) that William
 - a. was shot.
 - b. got into a fight with Jack.
 - c. fell through the railing.
- Which was most frightening?
 - a. The house was on top of a hill.
 - b. The house was very old.
 - c. The front door seemed to open and close by itself.
- The writer tries to make you think that
 - a. the men are alone in the house.
 - b. there may be ghosts in the house.
 - c. Fred is the smartest man.

x 5 =
NUMBER CORRECT YOUR SCORE

NOTING STORY ELEMENTS. Some story elements are **plot**, **character**, **setting**, and **mood**. Put an x in the box next to the right answer.

- What happened first in the *plot*?
 - a. William tried to wake up Fred.
 - b. The men walked along a dark road.
 - c. A breeze blew out the candles.
- Which sentence best *characterizes* Jack?
 - a. He thought that most houses were haunted.
 - b. He tried to trick the other men.
 - c. He said he didn't believe in ghosts.
- What is the *setting* of the story?
 - a. the Mayfair Inn
 - b. an old, dark house
 - c. a country road
- Which word tells the *mood* of the story?
 - a. scary
 - b. funny
 - c. happy

x 5 =
NUMBER CORRECT YOUR SCORE

THINKING MORE ABOUT THE STORY. Your teacher might want you to write your answers.

- ◆ Do you think that the men were alone in the house? Why?
- ◆ How can you explain the noises that the men heard?
- ◆ Suppose that William had stopped running down the hall. How do you think the story would have ended?

Use the boxes below to total your scores for the exercises. Then write your score on pages 138 and 139.

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