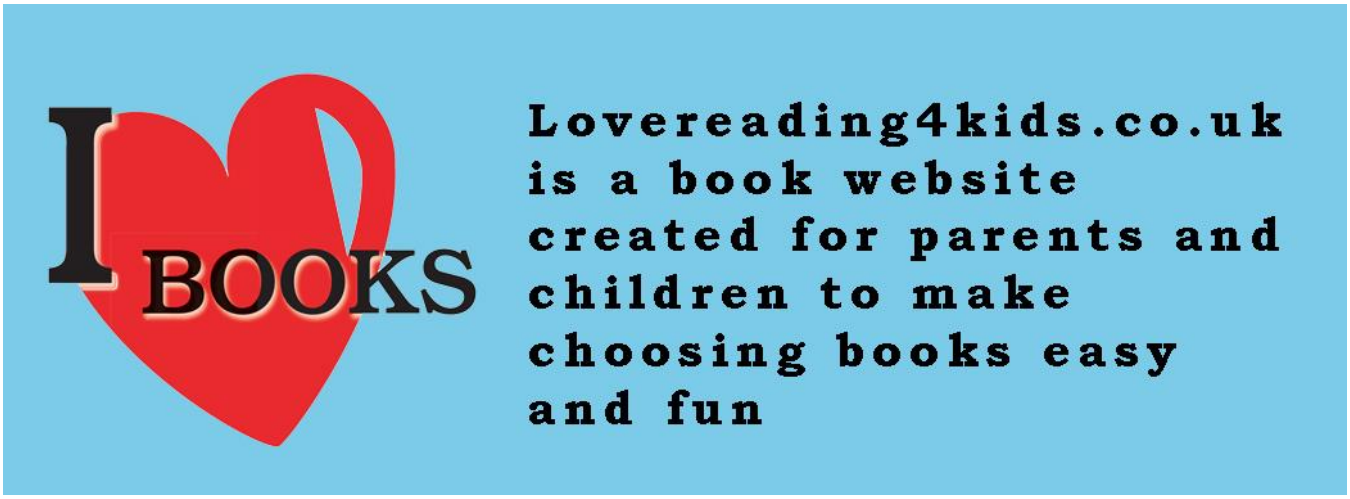


Opening extract from

Nancy Parker's Spooky Speculations

Written by

Julia Lee

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NANCY PARKER'S

Spooky Speculations

by

JULIA LEE

ILLUSTRATED BY CHLOE BONFIELD

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Dear Nancy,

I'm scribbling this quickly to say that I had hoped to come and see you at the Grange on Sunday but Father is taking me out for a treat. He says that I need cheering up. If he'd only let me abandon that wretched school I would be cheerful every day! Rest assured, I am thinking all the time about our investigation.

Your friend,

Ella Otter

P.S. If you come across any more strange occurrences: remember, think scientifically.

17. GOOD HUNTING

Professor Otter's idea of a treat was to visit a ruined abbey and then call on another professor for tea. Many years ago he had left his small town in America, which he felt was much too *new*, to study archaeology in England; and he never tired of looking at heaps of old stones. In the ordinary run of things Ella would have enjoyed the outing, but today she felt as if it was wasting precious time.

The abbey was in the middle of a farmer's field. Low ruins of walls were barely visible through their covering of brambles and shaggy grass. They marked rooms and doorways and passages, all meaningless to Ella. She would have learned something if she had listened to her father, but she was too busy thinking, 'I could be at Oxcoombe, looking for clues and questioning people!' She scrambled up the remains of a stone archway and watched the afternoon sun drop down behind the trees. At last her father signalled that it was time to go. She shivered and jumped down.

When they reached Professor Goring's house, Ella discovered that his study reminded her of home. Perhaps

all professors' houses were the same. It was cluttered with books and papers and curious bits and pieces, and smelled of pipe tobacco and woodsmoke from the fire. Mrs Goring brought Ella a pile of children's books to look at. They were much too young for her but Ella sat politely thumbing through, with half an ear to the adults' conversation. They were talking about the abbey.

Professor Goring said, 'When Henry VIII had the religious houses closed down, some—the choicest sites—were handed over to his friends and made into private homes. Some, however, were destroyed outright. Others were allowed to fall into ruin. In either case that was not quite the end of them. Their stones were scavenged for building materials by the local people. Now *that*, young lady,' he said, trying to include Ella, 'would be an interesting occupation: trying to spot ancient stones and beams and tiles that have been carried off and incorporated into newer buildings.'

'It sounds fascinating,' Ella replied, glad to find that Professor Goring didn't think she was just a child, 'but I'd have to find a site near home.'

Mrs Goring came back in with a plate of crumpets to toast on the fire, followed by a maid with the tea tray. They had to step carefully round Professor Goring, who was rifling through the bookshelves in vague sort of way.

'Something about that here . . . where is it . . .?' he muttered, but before he could find what he wanted something else distracted him. 'Look at this, Otter, ever

seen anything like that before?'

He held up a stunted, bulgy clay figure of a horse, not much bigger than his hand, which looked to Ella as if it had been made by a small child; a ham-fisted one at that. Professor Otter took it and turned it about, examining the figure closely. 'Interesting,' he said, in a tone that showed it *wasn't* a clay model made by a child. 'Not my area of expertise at all. But I can see it's very old. Where did you get it?'

'Some chap who deals in antiquities. Bale? Bailey? He keeps a shop not far from the British Museum—that's where I saw it, in the window. From ancient Greece, he says, the chap.' Professor Goring chuckled. 'It's far from *my* area of expertise, too!'

'If only you stuck to what you knew about, dear,' Mrs Goring teased him, and glanced at Ella to see if she agreed. But Ella felt strongly that she was on the professor's side, and refused to smile simperingly back.

Her father handed her the figure. Looking closely, she could see that it wasn't some clumsy childish attempt. Its bulges matched on both sides, its sturdy legs and neck showed the animal's strength. She returned it to Professor Goring who set it carefully back on a shelf.

'Now, where was I? Ah, yes.' He pulled down an old book and flicked through the roughly-cut pages. 'Where do you live again, Otter? Seabourne, is it? Yes, yes, there was an old priory, just a small community, at a place called Oxcoombe. Sold to Sir William de Warne.' He turned to Ella with a big smile, showing

off his snaggled teeth. 'Oxcoombe's not far from Seabourne. Good hunting!'

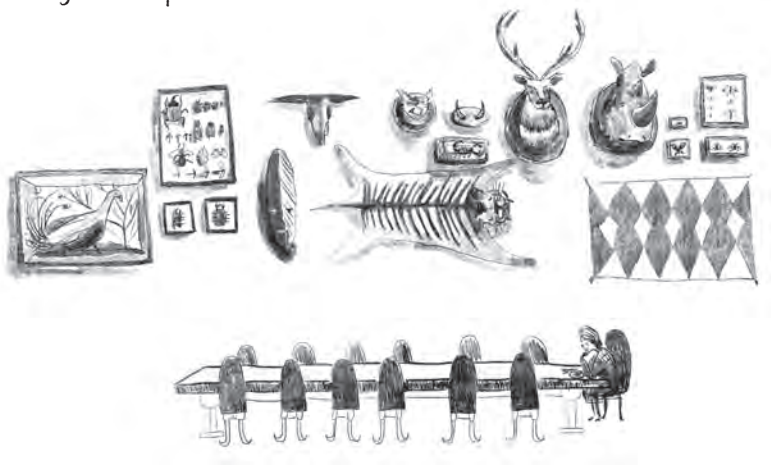
It was quite dark by the time they got on the train home. Ella gazed out of the window. Her reflection, yellowish and hollow-eyed in the dirty glass, gazed back. The tiresome treat had proved most fortunate in the end, better than she could ever have expected. An old priory at Oxcoombe, seized and sold to one of King Henry's friends, while its monks were thrown out and abandoned to their fate. Rebuilt as a private house . . . perhaps the shade of an angry prior or a miserable monk still haunted it? It had to be Oxcoombe Grange. Unless there were other large houses there? She had serious investigating to do. Good hunting, indeed.

18. JUST LIKE GOLDILOCKS

NANCY'S JOURNAL

I spoke too soon when I put 'Nothing to Report'!

Miss Dearing decided to take her supper in the Dining Room. She says she's the Lady of Oxcoombe Grange now & ought to act like it. Talk about fuss & bother—there's no one to know but me! (Not that I call putting up a washing line v. ladylike.) She cooked most of the meal herself but I had to carry the dishes thru. It took a while to get them from the kitchen & down the hallway, growing colder all the time. To my mind Miss D. looked very sad sitting there all alone at the end of that great long table. Like Goldilocks after she stole into the Bears' house—if the Bears' house was hung about with the heads & hides of other creatures they had captured & eaten!



Once I served the pudding (apple pie) she said—all very grand— 'I shall take coffee in the Drawing Room Nancy.'

The Drawing Room faces the sea & gets all the weather thrown at it. Those tall windows are full of gaps & drafts. I hadn't lit the fire in there—only laid it—not knowing she would want to be in there too. So I quickly put a match to the fire (quite a few matches in fact as the sea air makes everything DAMP) & lit the lamps & drew the curtains. It still felt far from Cosy.

When I came back with the coffee—I can make that—Miss Dearing was huddled up close to the fire with a box of chockolates open on a footstool. 'Do have one,' she said—much more like the old Miss Dearing. So I did. Lady Pouncey would not approve. In that book of hers she is VERY FIRM on the subject of Relations between Master & Servant.

Back in the kitchen I sat warming my feet on the oven door. I was just dozing off—on account of never sleeping well at night—when the Drawing Room bell rang.

Miss Dearing looked supprised. I said 'You rang for me Miss' and she said 'No I didn't.' I said 'You did Miss,' and she said 'Indeed I did not' and this went on a bit until she said I must be HEARING THINGS.

Oh this is a great house for hearing things! Except it is only me that does.

I hurried back to examine the bells—which are in the passageway just outside the kitchen—and what should I trip over in the hallway?

A HEAD!! A chopped-off head!



It went flying off my shoe & bounced on the bottom stair. The hallway's quite dingy so I didn't know it was a head at first. I had to bend down (with shaking hands & pounding heart) & see what on earth I'd kicked:—

Some kind of pig—but not any pig's head you'd see in the butchers. It must have fallen off the wall. When I looked up I could see the gap.

Then the Drawing Room bell rang again! I went back this time wondering if it would be another NO I DIDN'T! YES YOU DID! talk—but Miss Dearing was there all saucer-eyed saying 'Did I hear a scream Nancy?'

'You may have Miss' I replied. 'There is a head on the hall floor.'

'A HEAD??' she said looking even more like poor little Goldilocks scared stiff by the Bears coming home.

'A wild pig—but very dead. Fallen off the wall. One of

Mr Duggan's soo-veneers.'

Miss Dearing fanned herself with a newspaper & said 'I wundered if you were going to say a mouse's head—something a cat might bring in.'

'We haven't got a cat' I reminded her. She agreed. Then she said it was very likely the pig fell off of the wall cos the plaster was rotten—the nail was broken—the head had shrunk—or we had DISTURBED it with all our Comings & Goings.

None of those reasons convinced me. I don't think they convinced Miss Dearing neither. She looked quite shaken. I wish Miss D. did hold with strong drink as we might have had a nip of Brandy like my Gran ~~recko~~ reckermends for A BAD SHOCK. Instead I left her to her coffee—cold by now.

I still had to check the bells. I put my hand to the wire of the Drawing Room bell & it tinkled. I did it again. There was nothing to show whether or not the bell had truly rung before or WHO—or WHAT—had rung it.

So I crept back to my warm place by the Excelsior & got out this Journal. I cannot say my writing is very steady.

ODD OCKURRENCES AT OXCOOMBE GRANGE (CONTINUED)



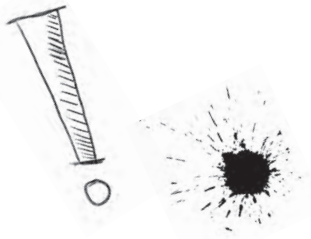
Latest events:—

9. Mysterious ringing of Drawing Room bell!

10. Pig's head fell off wall of its own accord!!

There is definitely something scary going on.







19. AS GOOD AS A MOULDY CABBAGE

NANCY'S JOURNAL

I think me & Miss Dearing both had a DREADFUL NIGHT, but Alfred appeared bright & early this morning to take her for a driving lesson—which gave us both something else to think about.

Miss D. has given in to Mr Lubbock and decided to keep the motor car. I just can't picture her driving it. Normally she is very peaceful—but when she gets in that donkey cart waving her whip at other ~~vickuls~~ veerculls—she reminds me of Britannia on a Penny coin with her trident & her big cart-wheel. (Aunty Bee says it's a shield but it always looks like a cart-wheel to me.)



So then—whether I wanted to or not—I got sent off to visit Alfred's Mum. I must say even if Miss D. does not give actual orders she can get you to do something just by Being Very Nice. 'You've not had your Day Off yet. We must make amends for that,' was what she said. But somehow my free time turned into calling on someone else's mother. 'Ma's been out of sorts lately' Alfred said. 'She'll be glad to see a cheery face.' I don't know how he could think my face is cheery when I'm looking my very worst!

I was nervous knocking on Mrs Lubbock's door. Last time it flew open & somebody furious told me to Go Away! I was hoping that wasn't actually Alfred's mum—but I reckernised her right off as the same woman. Except there was nothing cross or peevish about her today. Only a sniff remained.

'Do come in.' She quickly took off her apron & stuffed it somewhere while showing me into the Parlour. 'Alfred has TOLD ME ALL ABOUT YOU.' When someone says that I get a quaking feeling inside. What have they told? Good or bad? I was just wundering when she peered a bit closer.

'Oh dear! Forgive me Miss Parker' she said. (Miss Parker indeed!) 'It was you that called the other day. I must ~~apple~~ apollergise. You see—I was feeling so poorly I couldn't bake at all—& I did not want to pass on my germs.'

Just then the mantel-clock struck the ½ hour & Mrs Lubbock jumped up again saying 'Rolls' & dashed away. I