

The Haunted Landscape

ONLY once in my life did I experience contact with the supernatural, and the incident is still inexplicable, looked at from the materialistic standpoint. It happened in connection with the death of a close friend of mine, Jack Lindsay, the artist.

Jack was possessed of a stubbornly determined nature; he never gave up anything once begun, no matter how difficult the circumstances in connection with it. He was especially determined in regard to his painting; he often remarked, with a touch of quite natural melancholy in character with the observation, that death alone would stop him from reaching the highest point in his artistic career before he was thirty. He was about twenty-seven when he said that.

In discussing Jack's dogged grit with a common friend, Doctor Wilmott, the latter said: "If Jack lives to be forty he will already have become famous." When I replied that Jack had declared it his intention to make a name for himself by the time he was thirty, our friend assented thoughtfully. "I believe he will make the attempt," he granted; "but he has no time to lose."

The last time I saw Jack was just before he went away on one of his frequent sketching trips. When he mentioned his itinerary, I found he was passing within a few miles of a city where a cousin of mine was living, and I penciled a few words of informal introduction on the reverse of one of my cards, which, however, as afterward transpired, he never presented. He left me, apparently in high spirits, and although I heard nothing from him for a couple of months, I thought nothing of it because he was a notoriously poor correspondent.

Then I received a notice that shocked me to the soul. The police of a certain small town had found



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a dead body, presumably his, in the woods, where it had lain for weeks. Their supposition was that the young artist had taken his own life, as there were no marks of violence upon the body, and apparently nothing had been removed from the pockets. My card had served to identify him. His sketching paraphernalia in its entirety had been located at the home of a farmer of the neighborhood, Pete Grimstead, one of those "poor but honest" countrymen in which America abounds.

The farmer declared that several weeks back the artist had stopped at the house for something to eat; that after lunch he asked permission to leave his sketching outfit, as he wished to take a stroll through the woods without it. Grimstead had put the things into the "front room," which, as anyone who is at all acquainted with country people knows, is rarely used by them. Naturally they had forgotten all about the things until the hue and cry was made upon the discovery of the artist's body,

when they had immediately notified the police and given up the dead man's effects.

Both the farmer and his wife had declared that they were glad to get rid of the things. Asked why, they said they didn't know, but they felt there was something queer about them. And they did seem relieved to have the last vestige of the unfortunate man's visit removed from their house.

I did not like the idea of Jack's having committed suicide on the verge of a promising career; it was quite out of character with what I knew of him. But Grimstead and his wife were well regarded in their vicinity, and there seemed no reason to suspect that anything other than suicide or an accident of some kind had happened to poor Jack. However, the thought clung to me and persisted in obtruding itself the rest of the day when I was back at the country hotel, that there was much more back of the affair than appeared on the surface. The coroner persisted in his belief that it was a case of suicide, although I begged him to let it go down on the records as death by accident.

You know how it is when you suddenly feel an antipathy to a person without the slightest foundation for your feelings. Well, I simply "felt" that Grimstead and his wife knew more about Jack's tragic death than they had related, and the more I thought it over the more strongly was I convinced in my intuition. There was something I didn't like about the hanging head of the farmer; something shifty in the wife's eyes and unpleasant in the constant restless rubbing and twisting of her thin, gnarled hands. I determined to ferret out the secret hidden back of their apparently simple story.

Jack's effects were turned over to me, in lieu of relatives, and I put them in my room at the hotel. That night I set up the easel and put the landscape on it; I wanted to look at my friend's last piece of work while I strove to untangle the threads of thought which threatened to become hopelessly knotted. I lit my pipe and sat back comfortably, reflecting sadly on poor Jack's sudden and tragic death, the while my eyes took in the salient features of the landscape before me.

It was a carelessly executed bit of work, quite unfinished as yet on the right-hand side. The left side showed a bit of country with woods beyond and plowed fields toward the center. At the right appeared the roughly sketched-in outlines of a house. And it was upon this house that my attention became fixed as I smoked and reflected. Perhaps I

grew drowsy; perhaps it was a case of auto-suggestion; perhaps it was the powerful will of my friend projected no one knows how. Whatever it was, the longer I looked at that house the clearer the outlines grew. Such is the magic of the imagination that it seemed to me that an invisible brush was working over the house, dashing in a bit of color here, a touch there, until the whole house stood out clearly before my eyes.

I realized that I was hardly normal; that my long reflection on my friend's death had resulted in my becoming half drowsy, half languid; but I dreamily contemplated the picture, watching it come up, as it were, under my intent gaze, from a mere sketch into a finished piece of work. All that I saw I attributed to the vivid working of an overstimulated imagination, but at last something happened in that picture which by no means could have been attributed to imagination. *A light sprang up within the house and shone through one of the windows!*

II.

IRUBBED my eyes, leaned forward, taking my pipe from my lips, and looked intently, incredulously. There was no mistake about it; there was an actual flicker of light from behind one of the half-closed shutters of a window toward the rear of the house. I pinched myself vigorously and felt the pain with waking nerves, but the light did not fade away; it shone steadily on.

I whipped the picture from the easel and turned it over. It was an ordinary canvas, such as Jack had always used. A cold chill began to play down my spinal column as I returned the picture to the easel. I realized that there was in truth something unearthly about my friend's landscape; the farmer and his wife had been correct in their assertions that there was something supernatural and queer about it. I did not blame them for wishing to be rid of such a strange and unusual painting.

As for myself, I felt certain that there was something more than appeared upon the surface of this supernatural manifestation. I held myself rigidly alert, watching that strange and weird lighting of a painted landscape. I was aware that there was a Presence in the room with me and that there was something, some message, which it desired to impart; but while I held myself open for the intuitional reception of such a message, I could not restrain the cold shiver that went over me at the

realization of the propinquity of the discarnate, although I realized that my old friend could mean no harm to me.

I kept my eyes upon that mysteriously lighted window. As I watched, suddenly the door of the house seemed to open, and the light from within streamed out along the path before it. Simultaneously a shadow fell across the shaft of light, projected by moving figures within, and there appeared in the doorway a dark mass that, as it issued, could be distinguished as three figures. I strained my eyes to see the better. Good heavens, it was the figures of a man and a woman, carrying between them the limp body of another human being! As the significance of this flashed through my mind, they stopped on the threshold to close the door, shutting out the stream of light from the path. But as they passed the lighted window, where the path wound past it to the front gate, I saw, outlined against it in a broken but unmistakably familiar silhouette, the face of the honest farmer who had last seen my poor friend alive!

In my excitement I cried aloud. "You shall have justice, Jack!" I exclaimed.

The light in the window faded slowly away, but the outlines of the house remained, as did all the color work invisible hands had brushed in before my startled eyes. And the painting remained as it is today, a finished picture, the last gift of my dead friend to me.

I sat back, filled with unutterable awe at what I had witnessed. I knew that my friend had not died by his own hand; nor had he fallen and injured himself mortally in the woods. I knew that he had been foully done to death by hands which I could, and would, identify. I cannot say that I was afraid during the period of that marvelous manifestation; no, it was fury I felt that my friend must lie under the accusation of suicide when he had in reality been the victim of a sordid crime. I knew that he had come back to me to justify himself and to point out his murderers. I determined that they should be brought to justice. But how?

III.

THE rest of the night I sat smoking pipe after pipe, going over all the circumstances of Jack's death as they had been presented to me by the police and by Grimstead and his wife. There was no flaw in the story of the latter couple; it was

probable enough for the country constables to credit it readily. They had known Pete Grimstead and his wife for years, and had never seen anything to their discredit, save that they were poor and had a hard struggle for existence.

But—poverty is frequently the motive for crime. Yet what could have tempted them to kill a poor artist, who certainly had not carried on his person more than a few dollars? And the small amount found upon his body might have been all in his possession at that time. What else could he have shown them that they might have envied? His watch? It was a dollar watch, the fob a knotted black silk cord. Nothing tempting about that. Moreover, it had been found upon his body. His cuff links? Plain white buttons.

The body had been fully clothed when found. Stop! I did not remember having seen his hat. There had been no hat, and Jack had always worn—it was his only extravagance—a superfine Panama. His hat! Perhaps here was the clew to the mystery. It was not until dawn that I finally retired to sleep brokenly, sure in my heart that I had found a clew that would eventually unfold the motive and the mystery of the crime. It could not be that my poor friend had been murdered, at the threshold of a promising career, for the sake of a Panama hat! But that the hat was closely connected with the real story of his death I was fully persuaded. I was filled with impotent fury, but I determined to get a good sleep and then to make a visit to Pete Grimstead's farm. I did not wish to present myself there with my brain stupid after a sleepless night.

It was late that afternoon when I walked up the path to the house I had seen pictured so strangely in poor friend's last painting. I had asked the local constable to drive me out, and I recognized it immediately as the scene of the crime. He sat waiting outside in the wagon until I should have completed my questioning. I felt as though I were in a dream as I stood upon the threshold from which I had seen, the night before, that guilty pair issuing. I knocked strongly.

It was the woman who answered. She opened the door slowly, and, as it appeared to me, cautiously. When she saw who it was she uttered a single choked exclamation, and shut the door sharply in my face. I heard her hurried footsteps retreating in the hall, and then the sound of her voice calling her husband from the back door.

I kept up an occasional sharp knocking. The

constable, who had not seen the door opened, called out that I'd better go to the back door, so I stepped down to the path. As I turned the corner I saw the woman on the doorstep, her face absolutely gray in the soft afternoon light, her eyes straining anxiously toward the barn, from whence came the gruff call of her husband. When she heard my footsteps she turned abruptly, threw out her hands as if to ward off something, made as though to reenter the house, and crumpled up in a heap on the door stone.

I stood rooted to the spot, torn by conflicting emotions. She was a woman, an elderly woman, and I should have gone to her assistance. She was a woman—but perhaps her hands had been stained in the blood of my dearest friend! I stood coldly aloof, awaiting events.

It was her husband who lifted her from the ground, shooting a vindictive glance at me as he bent over her. I could see that he had been suffering mentally; yet I felt nothing but fierce pleasure at the sight. He was a murderer, and it was meet that he should experience mental torture until such time as he suffered the legal punishment that was his just due.

He carried the limp form into the house and laid her down on a horsehair sofa in the front room. I followed him. The chill of that room penetrated my bones with a horrid suggestion of what had taken place there so short a time ago. He turned upon me with a sudden bracing of his shoulders and a tossing back of his head that reminded me against my will of a gallant stag driven at bay.

"Well, what do you want?" he asked, with such hopelessness in his tones that I could have felt pity for him in his plight had I not steeled my heart for what I had to do.

"I want to ask you a few more questions about the—the manner of my friend's death," I replied tensely, bending a piercing gaze upon him.

He took an involuntary step backward against the sofa where lay the unconscious partner of his guilt. The movement displaced a crudely decorated sofa pillow, one of two propped against either arm of the sofa. It slipped, and would have gone to the floor had he not thrown himself upon it with a desperate effort that seemed out of all proportion to the trifling incident.

"Well," he shot at me, but in an agitated manner, "what is it you want to know?"

He remained before the sofa, his attitude that of

one who hides a secret or protects something helpless. Flashing through my mind came the subconscious memory of a glint of white under the pillow. With a quick movement I sprang to the sofa, and although the farmer flung himself simultaneously against me he was too late. I pulled the cushion away with determined hand and disclosed—Jack Lindsay's Panama hat!

IV.

I LOOKED at Grimstead with stern accusation. He regarded me with horror written large upon his weather-beaten countenance. His eyes were stricken; his shoulders, so courageously braced back a moment since in an assumption of innocence, sank in and stooped over. He was the very picture of confounded guilt.

Stepping to the door, I hallooed to the constable, who clambered out, secured the horse, and came hurrying up the path. Wordlessly I pointed to the hanging head of the guilty man and to the Panama hat, crushed up against the arm of the sofa. The officer stood with dropped jaw and straining eyes.

From the sofa came the moaning cry of the woman. "Tell them the truth, Pete! Oh, I told you it would have been better to have told it in the beginning! Such things are always found out."

The constable looked horror-stricken at me, and I looked triumphantly back at him. I had located the murderer when no one had so much as suspected a murder; I had vindicated my poor friend from the charge of suicide, under which his noble spirit had been unable to rest in peace.

The woman's voice went on weakly. "He came in here to get something to eat," she wailed. "We gave him his lunch. When he got up to go he put his hands suddenly to his heart, opened his mouth as if he were going to speak, and then fell right down on the floor. He was dead! Oh, believe it or not, he was dead! We didn't lay a hand on him. But he was dead, in our house, and we were afraid. We are poor. We were afraid of what people might think, because that very morning Pete plowed up the bag of coins he had lost thirty years ago. We wouldn't dare spend it. We were afraid we'd be accused of killing and robbing!" Her voice rose in a shrieking crescendo of agony: "Oh, believe it or not, it is true—every word I'm telling you is God's own truth!"

Her husband threw himself down beside her,

hiding his face in his toil-worn hands.

"What did you do then?" I managed to ask, my head whirling.

Grimstead lifted a defiant face. "I don't suppose you will believe us," he said shortly and without bitterness, "but what my wife says is quite true. After he dropped and we found he was dead, we talked it over. We were afraid of what people might think. We decided to carry his body away to a distance and say he had left here for a walk and had never returned. I wish now," he added dejectedly, "that we had come out with the truth in the beginning. I suppose it looks worse for us now than it would've looked then."

The constable's eyes questioned me appealingly.

I touched the Panama hat. "And this?" I questioned.

"It fell off when we were carrying him away," said Grimstead dully. "We found it on the path when we came back, and we didn't dare go out there with it, so we hid it here."

"Why didn't you burn it?" queried the constable, astonished that this incriminating evidence should have been left in such a conspicuous hiding place.

Grimstead shrugged his shoulders. "We weren't guilty of anything. Why should we burn it? We never thought anyone would come looking here. We'd have given it up with the other things, only it might have looked queer if we'd had his hat."

He looked directly at my companion then. "Well, why don't you arrest me?" he demanded.

Again the constable and I exchanged glances. By common consent we stepped out of the chilling atmosphere of the room into the soft light of summer afternoon.

"I must tell you," said the constable, "that I remember hearing, when I was a young fellow, that Pete Grimstead had the money ready to pay off the mortgage on his farm and lost it somewhere as he was plowing his fields. Hunt as he might, he could never lay hands on it again. There's never been anything against the Grimsteads, in all the time I can remember, except that they are poor and hard working, and that isn't really a crime. Of course, sir, if you feel that you want to go further in the matter," his voice died away, and his eyes questioned mine.

I thought hard and fast. Perhaps, after all, my poor friend's spirit had come to me not to bring

murderers to justice, but merely to vindicate his own reputation, he who had always intended to fight it out to the end, he who had determined to become famous before death cut short his career. As I came to this conclusion I felt a lightness of heart that convinced me I had arrived at the correct significance of Jack's manifestation.

At the expression on my face the man drew a long sigh of relief.

"I'm glad you aren't going to pile up troubles for them." He jerked his thumb toward the house. "I'm sure the story is just as they told it. Did your friend ever mention his having any heart trouble, now?"

Into my mind flashed Doctor Wilmott's words. "If he lives to be forty he will be a famous man," he had said.

As I recollected more or less distinctly, there had been a faint accentuation upon the word "lives."

"I believe they've told us the truth," I said heartily, meeting the other man's eyes frankly. "The only thing I want now is to have the record of suicide cleared up positively once and for all. I'm sure it can be done without implicating those poor unhappy people further."

The constable stepped to the door. "Better give me that hat," he suggested, his cheerful, matter-of-fact voice affecting both the stricken man and his wife with sudden hope. "I'm sure you don't want to be reminded of the affair any longer," and he put out his hand for the Panama, which he passed on to me. Then he stretched out his right hand wordlessly to Grimstead.

The farmer took it wonderingly, his expression incredulous. So much had he suffered from his own fears for weeks that he could hardly believe the matter entirely cleared up. Not so Mrs. Grimstead. With happy tears streaming down her cheeks, she said brokenly: "God bless you both for believing us!"

The records in town were changed when the constable returned, so that my unfortunate friend was no longer charged with suicide; his death was entered as heart failure. But no mention was made of the Grimsteads. The story they had given in the beginning stood in the records as true; only the constable, the coroner, and myself knew the real facts.

Upon my return to my home city I satisfied myself that Doctor Wilmott had indeed accented

the word "lives"; he had examined Jack, and had told him that only with the utmost care could he expect to live longer than five or six years and that even this time might be cut short without a moment's notice.

As for the haunted landscape, it hangs on the walls of my room, one of the best examples of my

dead friend's masterly art. There seems to be nothing mysterious about it now, for although I have often sat late, smoking, watching the half-closed shutters of the house, never again have I seen light streaming from the windows upon the pathway before the door.