

Weird Tales

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THE GHOST OF LISCARD MANOR



JACK HARDING shook the water from his rain soaked hat and stood looking at the strong, high, rust-encrusted gates of the main entrance to the grounds of Liscard Manor.

Throughout the three miles of his tramp from the suburbs of the manufacturing town the rain had fallen in sheets, but now, as if it had abandoned the idea of subduing this figure who so persistently stumbled through the mud and darkness, the rain had ceased. Great rifts appeared in the low, scuttling clouds, disclosing at intervals—now long, now short—the silver sphere of the full moon.

Jack Harding felt a momentary shiver pass through his rain soaked frame. It may have been the chill of the wind as it whispered through the naked branches of a nearby oak; and yet his circulation was still strong, his breath was scarcely down to normal. Throughout his three mile walk through the rain and mud he had not paused or slackened his pace, but plodded as one who, having before him an unpleasant task, seeks to have done with it with the utmost possible dispatch.

It seemed hardly possible that two short hours before he had been seated at his case in the warm, almost luxurious room, the guest of the local Commerce Club of a busy manufacturing town in the County of Lancashire, England.

Jack Harding was in England on business for his firm, Messrs. Franklin

& Goldstine of New York, who controlled a chain of department stores throughout the Eastern States.

His business at an end and, having two more days before he could return to New York, he had, at the request of some of the business men of the town, delayed his departure for Liverpool and become a guest at the dinner held in honor of a visiting magistrate.

The dinner over, and the last speech made, a party of the younger members had retired to the smoking room of the club. The conversation had turned to the supernatural, for, being free for the time from the cares of commerce, they chose a topic as remote as possible from the usual, as a workman, leaving his work bench, dresses in his best clothes and saunters at his leisure through the residential part of the city.

It was young Saunders (the son of the man who had, early in the evening, spoken at length upon matters more or less of interest to the members present) who first mentioned the haunted manor outside the limits of the town.

"It's a weird looking pile, half ruins," he said, leaning back in his chair, a look of devilment on his slightly flushed, good-looking, boyish features.

"Yes, sir. Precisely at two in the morning, you know," smiled Saunders, turning to Jack Harding. "We rather pride ourselves in having in our ghost something out of the ordi-

nary. None of this twelve o'clock idea, you know—at two o'clock to the minute! With regards to the cause of this phenomenon, I'm afraid we are rather ordinary—the old chap, returning from the wars, finds his thrice beloved spouse in the arms of another—an outh—a scream from the lady—a flash of naked steel, and the ever-widening pool of blood on the floor—and all that, you know."

"And you really believe all that bosh about the lady walking through the room at two in the morning?" Harding asked incredulously.

"Absolutely!" Saunders answered, throwing the stub of his cigar into the open fireplace. "It would hardly be considered the thing not to. There was one chap put in there as caretaker or something; he commenced his duties at three one Saturday afternoon and resigned at five minutes past two on Sunday morning. Old Johnson, the bobby who patrols that part, saw him soon after his resignation. He said he was making remarkably good time, considering the old chap's age and the fact that he toddles round with the aid of a wooden leg."

The company chuckled at the idea of the old man, his whiskers flying in the wind, as he tore hippity-skip down the dark road, with the one idea of putting a great distance between himself and the manor in the shortest possible time.

"But seriously," continued Saunders, as the laughter died, "I for one would not care to wander round the old place at night. I have been round in the day time, and that is quite sufficient."

"And was another caretaker installed after the old fellow quit in such a hurry?" asked Harding, with a smile, half-amused, half-contemptuous.

Saunders sat a little more erect in his chair as he detected the slightly contemptuous tone of the American.

"Yes, sir," he replied, "there have been several who have tried it, some tempted by the offer of a large salary and an easy job; also others have tried it for the love of adventure. Up to date no one has stayed overnight. Is that not so, gentlemen?" he asked, turning to several of the members.

They nodded gravely.

"There is something out of the ordinary about the old place," remarked one of the elderly gentlemen who had joined the party and stood listening. "But as to no one being able to stay in the place over night, I am afraid our young friend here, Mr. Saunders, is rather overdoing it."

Saunders leaned back in his chair, his hands thrust deep in his trousers pockets.

"Nevertheless, sir," he answered, "I am prepared to wager any gentleman present that he will not do so."

All eyes turned in the direction of Harding. It was evident that they looked to him for an answer. He was annoyed at the evident trap into which he had fallen. But there was only one thing to do—accept the wager.

Drawing a leather bill fold from his pocket, he addressed Saunders: "And how much will you bet that I don't go there tonight and stay until daylight tomorrow morning?"

Saunders sat upright in his chair joyfully.

"I'll wager twenty pounds, sir—that is, one hundred dollars in your money—that you will not go to the manor alone, enter and remain there until daylight. As proof that you have been there, you are to hammer five large-headed nails into the floor of the room where the ghost is supposed to enter. Is that agreeable to you, Mr. Harding?"

Harding rubbed his chin thoughtfully. It seemed fair enough. He nodded his head.

"Yes, I guess that suits me all right," he answered.

The elder members tried to persuade Harding from his foolish errand, but he felt he could not very well draw out without becoming the laughingstock of the rest.

"My dear sir—this is foolishness! It's raining like the devil; you'll be simply drenched before you are half way there," they remonstrated.

But the younger men pressed forward and outnumbered the reasoning of the elders.

"Oh, rot! Absolutely rot, sirs!" they joined in chorus.

A taxi was called. Harding and Saunders, with as many more as could possibly climb in or hang on, made their way in the taxi to the hotel where Harding and Saunders were staying. It was only a matter of minutes for Harding to change from evening dress to a traveling suit, more appropriate for the business in hand. More from habit than anything else, he slipped the strap of his holster over his shoulder, then a heavy ulster over his suit, and with a soft hat in his hand, joined the others in the bar.

A few more drinks—in most cases, including Saunders, a few too many—and they climbed into the waiting taxi.

"We'll run you as far as the outskirts, old man, and then all you'll have to do is to follow the main road until you come to a signpost, turn to your right and follow the road. You can't miss it," said Saunders.

He thrust an ivory handled revolver into Harding's hand, together with hammer and nails.

"Don't try and hammer the nails with the gun and shoot the ghost with the hammer," he jokingly advised, as the taxi came to a stand beneath the last street lamp of the town.

Scrambling out, they stood shaking hands and slapping Harding on the shoulders.

"Just to show you fellows what business men we Americans are, if I do meet the lady, I'll sell her a

dress length of your own cloth," he chuckled.

Leaving the crowd standing under the light of the street lamp, he turned in the direction of the manor and strode at his best pace through the rain.

HARDING shook the gates of the Park, but they were locked and apparently had not been unlocked for years. If the caretakers had jumped the job so hurriedly, it was evident that they had not departed by means of the gate.

The gate was at least twelve feet high and adorned with sharp twisted spikes, once gilded, but now poisonous with rust. Peering through the bars, he watched the shadows of the clouds race across the rank weeds that overgrew the lawn and drives. So rank were they that he could only judge the direction the drive took by the two lines of trees standing like sentinels, their naked branches dripping from the recent rain, swinging and whispering in the wind.

In the distance, when the moon shone its brightest, he could see the dark outline of a large building. This was evidently the manor, and some few yards from the gate, the lodge, where, in the years of prosperity, the lodgekeeper had lived.

Harding could picture it all now as he stood there peering—the stout gatekeeper running forth from the rose-covered door, the huge key of the gate in his hands; the swinging open of the great gates on their well-oiled hinges; the rattle of "milady's" carriage as it swung through; the rocking horses straining at the traces in their eagerness for the warm stable and oats; the postilion holding the horses in with a firm hand, his long curled hair bobbing to the time of the horses' manes.

But now the iron trellis work that had stood before the door of the lodge, rose-covered in summer, spar-

bling with frost and snow in winter, was broken. Leaning drunkenly against the wall of the house, the eave trough, still dripping water, was ragged and broken. The glass in the windows was broken or gone entirely, and only the diamond-shaped frames showed green with mold in the moonlight. One never knows how the windows of the houses become broken, but they always do. Certainly it was not the boys from the nearby village; they would not have ventured near the manor for all the candy in Mother Brown's shop.

Harding awoke from his reverie with a start. Standing mooning here was of no use. He glanced at his watch in the moonlight. One o'clock. He would have to get busy if he was going to drive those nails.

Passing farther along the high stone wall which surrounded the Manor Park, he found an entrance where the lichen-covered wall had crumbled away. Undoubtedly this was what the caretakers had used as a means of exit. Scrambling over the pile of stone at the foot of the gap, Harding entered the park.

The shadows of the clouds were still racing across the open, and the wind was gaining in strength. The trees nodded and clashed their branches as if in anger at the audacity of this intruder. Harding stood for a moment looking about him. Again that shiver crept over him, in spite of sums in mental arithmetic with which he tried to keep his imagination from gaining control of him.

That shiver caused him to shrug his shoulders as if something vile had brushed against him.

As he made his way along the avenue of trees, his teeth clenched, and adding an imaginary column of figures, he was startled out of control by a huge owl. As it glided on silent wings above his head, it gave forth a mournful hoot.

Harding cringed as if the owl had struck him. His heart ceased its wild beating and leapt into his throat. Unconscious that he spoke aloud, he crouched against the trunk of a tree and gasped: "And nine's, ninety—now what in blazes was that? Of all the bone-headed stunts I ever pulled, this is the daddy of 'em all."

There was no doubt about it, Harding's nerve was on edge. It had seemed easy, back there in the well-lit club-room, to scoff at the supernatural, but here, alone, with only owls and bats for company—

He pulled himself together with an effort. His hand, thrust into the pocket of his ulster, came into contact with the cold butt of the revolver—a comforting feeling. There is something about the feeling of a gun which gives confidence to a man and a feeling of power.

He finished the remaining distance to the manor almost at a run, and stood looking up at the high rambling building, its multioned windows in a worse state of repair than those of the lodge. The main entrance was approached by a broad flight of stone steps. At the foot of either balustrade, perched on a square column, sat the carved image of some hideous animal of unknown species, one fore-paw balancing a shield that bore the crest of the family.

Somehow, Harding could not bring himself to mount those steps and try the massive door. The moon played such tricks with the clouds that the whole building seemed to be peopled with moving shadows. Once Harding thought he saw some one watching him from the shadow of the eastern wing—a still tall form, which beckoned silently with outstretched arm and hand.

He stumbled backwards, fearful of turning his back to that silent figure. Again his hand found and grasped the cold butt of the revolver. Again that feeling of confidence came to

him, less this time, to be sure, but still sufficient to check him. Courageously he forced himself, step by step, in the direction of the beckoning figure, the revolver in his outstretched hand, the barrel making erratic curves as he advanced.

He was at the foot of the steps when his hand sank to his side and his heart resumed its beating. The figure was nothing but a fallen piece of masonry, the beckoning hand a branch of ivy, its leaves trembling in the wind.

Harding leaned against the stone column and laughed, not the deep hearty laugh of mirth, but the shrill cackle of breaking nerves. Had he been wise, he would have abandoned this foolish stunt right then and returned to the jeers and comfort of his fellow beings. But Harding was too cowardly to be afraid. As much as he wished himself out of the business, he feared the laughter of the others far more.

There was only one thing to do: climb in by some window and find the room. It would not take long to hammer the nails, then he could crouch in some corner, his back to the wall, and wait for the dawn.

The window found, he was soon inside and feeling in his pocket for a match. Such was his haste to obtain a comforting light, that three matches were broken before he obtained it. He could see by the feeble light of the match that he was in a large bar room. The floor was rotting away, the boards crumbling under his feet; on the side farthest from the window was a door.

Another match lit, he carefully passed through and found himself in a large hall. He had been instructed to ascend the broad flight of stairs leading to the upper story and enter the first room on the right. Here he was to hammer the nails and wait for daylight.

He hastily mounted the stairs, on tiptoe, as if fearful of all sound, and

stood at the door of the fateful room. It took the last atom of his courage to enter. He leaned against the door, and stood looking round a bare, large room. There was no need for matches here, for the moon shone through the casement as bright as day.

A bat, on silent wings, flew into the room, and after circling round, departed as silently as it had entered. A rat scuttled from a corner, crossed the floor and disappeared behind the wainscoting. That was all.

The silence was so intense that he could hear his heart pounding as if it would burst. The breath in his throat whistled and gargled and his tongue felt like a piece of parched leather, as he vainly sought to moisten his dry lips.

With trembling hands, he fumbled in his coat for the hammer and nails and forced himself from the door to the center of the room. His one idea, the only idea his fast-numbing brain could form, was to drive home the nails and get his back once more against something solid.

Hastily dropping to his knees, he grasped the hammer with nerveless fingers. The first blow he struck echoed through the house like the boom of a cannon.

For a full half minute he crouched motionless, then, with frantic haste he wielded the hammer. Blow after blow crashed upon his fingers until the blood spurted, but he was not conscious of this.

The wall! Get his back against the wall! That was all he thought.

THE FOURTH nail was driven—it seemed that he had been hammering there for years—when some unknown power made him pause and look about him.

The moon shone directly upon the door—shone upon the oval knob of the handle; and the knob, like the relentless second hand of the watch of death, was slowly turning.

He did not know it, but now he was moaning—his reason was fast leaving him. As the handle finished its turning, the door commenced to open, inch by inch, foot by foot, until it revealed a shapeless, hideous figure, bathed in the sickly light of the moon. Slowly, without apparent effort, it drifted, rather than walked, toward the center of the room. One shapeless arm, which seemed to be detached from the rest of the body, pointed toward him.

He attempted to rise and make a dash for the window — better be dashed to pieces in the courtyard below than crouch there with this thing slowly advancing toward him. But he could not rise—the extended arm seemed to have stricken him powerless. Strive as he might, he could not move. If this thing would only speak or make a sound; but it stood there motionless. Even the rats had ceased their scuffling and remained silent in their holes.

Something like a faint violin string seemed to snap in his brain. Stark madness took the place of fear. Grasping the revolver, he aimed at the silent figure. Again and again he pressed the trigger. The roar of the discharge in that silent house sounded like peals of thunder. It was impossible to miss at that distance, but the figure did not move; it gave no indication of injury, but stood there as shapeless and horrible as ever.

The revolver slipped from his fingers and clattered to the floor. Hot searing panic was tearing at his heart. Mechanically he groped with his hand at his breast and his fingers felt the holster of his automatic. He snatched the gun from its holster, and firing at the figure one last shot, slumped forward unconscious.

THE MOON had sunk behind a distant hill; the light of day would soon be taking its place; when the manor rang to the sound of calling

voices and the grounds became less mysterious in the light of stable lanterns carried in the hands of a boisterous party of searchers.

Whistling and calling, they made their way up the weed-entangled drive. And yet in their laughter and calling one could detect a note of anxiety. Entering the manor, they hastened up the staircase and burst open the door of the haunted room without ceremony. There they stood aghast.

Holding a lantern aloft, the better to see, they entered.

Lying on his back, a black-daubed sheet thrown to one side, as if in his death agony he had endeavored to cast it away, lay the body of Saunders, the breast of his shirt saturated with blood. Hastily examining him, they found life extinct. That last shot had entered his heart.

One of the party picked up the revolver.

"I don't understand it!" he stammered. "I loaded it myself—they were all blanks."

They bent over Harding and tried to raise him, but could not do so: in his haste to be through with the hammering, he had driven the nails through the skirt of his long overcoat into the floor and held himself fast.

They tore the nails from the floor and felt his heart. It was still beating, but his lips were slimy with saliva. His open eyes stared with a look of insanity at the light held above him.

As they turned him to a more restful position, the automatic fell from the folds of his coat. Someone picked it up.

"My God! I did not know he had an automatic! I am going for a doctor," he called over his shoulder.

"And the police," someone advised sadly.

As they stood there uncovered, the laughter gone from their faces, the light of dawn slowly commenced to flood the room.

Jack Harding had won his wager.