

*The Mysterious Lights*  
by J. A. Thompson

IN THE FALL OF 1850, I had occasion to visit that wild and picturesque country, known in the West, as the “Ozark Region,” “laying and being” in the southern part of Missouri, and the northern portion of Arkansas—in fact, forming the dividing line between those two States. At the time of which I write, “the region” was sparsely settled, and it was considered a good day’s travel from one inn, or house of public entertainment, to another.

It was a cold, disagreeable day in the latter part of October, that I set out on horseback from the “Cross Keyes,” a roadside inn, situated in the mountains, to go to a settlement distant some thirty miles. The road that I had to follow, led through mountain passes, over hills, and across dark valleys covered with heavy growths of timber. In the summer, or early autumn, this route would have been delightful to the traveler who admires wild and romantic scenery, but on the present occasion it was to me anything but delightful.

By the middle of the afternoon, I had got fairly out of the mountainous country, and entered upon a level track of land covered by a dark forest of heavy timber. The clouds that had obscured the sun all day now began to thicken and look black and threatening. The wind, cold and piercing, whistled through the forest in a manner which I knew indicated a coming storm. I was not mistaken in my conjectures, for in a short time the rain began to fall in torrents. I was soon drenched by the falling water. Judging by the distance I had come, and the appearance of the country, I knew that I was not far from the settlement, and I determined to push forward as fast as possible. For an hour or more, I rode on at a brisk trot. It was now nearly dark, yet the storm continued to rage in all its wild fury. The driving rain and sleet almost blinded me and my horse as we pushed forward in the fast gathering gloom. I endeavored to discover, if possible, some sign of the settlement or some human habitation where I might obtain shelter for the night. Whenever I raised my head to discover my whereabouts, my eyes invariably received such a discharge of sleet and water, that I was compelled to lower it again to ward off the damaging effects of the storm. Thus, my powers of vision were confined to the limited space occupied by my horse’s neck and the pommel of my saddle. Even these objects became dim and indistinct in the blackness of the coming night. Dropping the reins, I entrusted myself and safety to that sagacious animal’s instinct, knowing full well, that if there were a farmhouse within reach he would discover it, and lead me to it accordingly. In ten minutes, after giving him the reins, he stopped suddenly in the road and began sniffing the air, then struck off at right angles, from the main road, and entered the timber and underbrush on my right. Holding out my arms in opposite directions, I discovered that I was in a narrow path that led—I knew not where, but as I had entrusted my safety to the care of my horse, I determined to allow him to have his own way. For nearly a quarter of an hour I rode on in a brisk trot over this gloomy unknown road, each moment expecting to see or hear some sign that would lead me to some shelter, but I was aware of nothing, save the continued splash—splash of my horse’s feet in the mud and water on the ground, and an occasional spark of fire, struck from a flint by one of his shoes.

At the end of fifteen minutes, I came to an opening, of not more than two hundred yards in circumference; in the centre of this, stood a dark object, which I immediately recognized as a house.

Seeing no lights, and judging from the lateness of the hour that the inmates were all abed, I dismounted; fastening the bridle rein to the fence, I advanced to the door and made the usual signal for admittance, but received no reply. I then rapped as loud as I could with the butt of my riding whip, but still no answer; I then began kicking the door with my foot, calling aloud, at the same time, for admittance. In a short time a husky voice, on the inside, demanded my name and business.

“Jones,” said I, giving the first name I could think of. “I am a belated traveller, and desire food and a night’s lodging for myself and horse.”

“You are not a ghost then, are you?” continued the voice.

“Not by a good deal, my kind sir; but can’t say how soon I shall be one, if you don’t let me in out of this storm, and give me something to eat,” I said, in half smiling wonder at the singular question of the insider.

“Then wait a moment, and I will let you in.”

The “moment” was occupied by the man in removing bolts and bars from the door; then it swung open and I entered. Before me stood a man with a haggard face and disheveled hair, with a gun raised to his shoulder pointing directly at me; in a corner crouched a woman in her night clothes, her face pale as death, and who looked as though she were frightened half out of her wits.

“Put down your gun, my good man,” I said. “I am neither ghost nor hobgoblin, but of real flesh and blood like yourself.”

This appeared to satisfy him in a manner, and putting the gun in the corner, he advanced very cautiously to where I stood, and began feeling my arms and examining my person. When he had done, he said, in a pleasanter voice:

“I believe you; you may sit down there by the fire and dry your clothes.”

“No; I must see that my horse is sheltered before I can take any rest myself.”

“Then bring him around into the yard, you will find food and shelter for him at the back of the house.”

I did as directed, wondering all the time in my mind, what could be the matter with the man in the house. After seeing that my animal was properly cared for, I again entered the cabin. The woman, by this time, had changed her clothes and was going about preparing my supper. I took a seat near the fire, where I had full view of both host and hostess.

They were young, and according to my judgment, had not been married long. After examining their faces narrowly, and watching their movements for a short time, I concluded that my host and his wife were frightened, wonderfully frightened, at something, but what that something

was, I was at the moment unable to determine. After I had finished my meal I was shown a small pallet on the floor, where I was told I could lay down to rest as soon as I felt so disposed. As I had been travelling all day and the greater part of the night, I sorely felt the need of a few hours' sleep; so removing my coat and boots I stretched myself at full length on the pallet, and in a few moments was wrapt in profound slumber.

How long I slept I know not; but this I do know, that I was awakened by one of the loudest, wildest, and most unearthly screams that I ever heard; I sprang to my feet and gazed about the room. The man and woman were in the same position as I had first seen them that night; my first thought was that the man was about to take the life of his wife with the weapon that he held in his hand, but as I advanced towards him, for the purpose of wringing it from his grasp, the same scream was again repeated; this time it came from the yard in front of the house. Going to the window, I lifted the curtain and looked forth. There I saw an object clothed in white, dancing about over the yard, now and then, throwing up its long, white arms and uttering the same screams that had so startled me but a few moments previous. For five minutes, I stood and watched this ghostly apparition, as it performed its gyrations over the ground; at the end of that time it disappeared from my sight and did not visit the cabin again that night. Dropping the curtain I resumed my seat near the fire. Taking out my watch I found that it was just one o'clock.

"Come, my friend," said I, pointing to a chair at my side. "Come, sit down here and tell me what all this means."

The man advanced trembling, and mechanically took the chair that I had designated. For some moments he remained silent, then in a faltering voice, which plainly indicated the extent of his fright, he said:

"Before I say anything in regard to these strange proceedings, I wish to show you another sight, which you have not seen;" saying which, he arose and began ascending the ladder, which stood in one corner of the room, and which led to the loft above. I arose and followed close at his heels. When we reached the upper apartment he approached a small window, which was made in the further end of the room; removing a dusty paper that was fastened over it, he told me to look out. I did so, and on an elevated piece of land, not distant more than a quarter of a mile, I saw *two lights*, one red, the other white, and but a few feet distant from each other. Just behind the lights, was an old long building which I recognized as a church. By the light reflected from its side I discovered that the opening, for several yards around the building, was used as a burying ground, and it was on two newly made graves that the lights were situated. They burned with a bright, steady blaze, notwithstanding the wind was blowing a perfect gale during the time I was observing them from the window. As I was about replacing the paper over the window, a prolonged, dismal ail, as if uttered by some one suffering the most intense agony, was borne to my ears upon the advancing wind; then followed a succession of reports like the discharge of heavy artillery. The man at my side fairly shook with affright as these sounds fell upon his ears. I looked forth again, but could see nothing save the lights, the church and the graves. I must confess that I was frightened, although I claim to possess rather a philosophical turn of mind; yet, in this particular case, my philosophy failed me. Had the same thing occurred in some town or village graveyard, I should have thought nothing of it, for I could have attributed the cause to some person or persons, endeavoring to frighten the inhabitants; but for such a thing to be seen

and heard here, in this wild and sparsely settled region, was beyond my power to comprehend. I closed the window and followed my friend quickly down the ladder. Seating ourselves again by the fire, the man at my side said:

“Myself and wife have been married just two years this fall, and have been living on this place about half that time. Previous to my moving here, this farm, which by the way, is a very good one, belonged to my uncle, who resided in D— county. At his death he left his estate to his two nephews, myself and [my] cousin. The substance of the will was this: two thirds of the property should belong to the nephew who should reside on this farm for the space of four years. What reasons my uncle had for so disposing of his estate, I am unable to say. As I was married at the time of my uncle’s death, and my cousin was not, that relative proposed to me, that, if I would give him his portion in ready money, and take mine in real estate, that I might have the two third part spoken of in the will. I accepted the proposition and move here accordingly. My relative took the money and left the country, and I have not heard from him since the day of his departure. My uncle, at his own request, was buried over there in that graveyard. In regard to the sights which you have seen here tonight, I know nothing of them whatever, save the very same things have been repeated each night, for the last week. I never was a believer in ghosts, or anything of the kind, yet I am at a loss to know how to account for these strange nightly proceedings, and unless I can discover the cause in a short time I shall be compelled to leave my place, and thereby forfeit my claim to the two third part.” Here he ceased speaking and began replenishing the fire with fuel. At length, after a few moments’ silence, thinking I had a clue to the mystery, I spoke:

“Friend,” said I, “I believe I can clear up this matter for you.”

“Do it,” he said, opening his eyes wide in expectation, “and half I possess is yours.”

“I shall charge nothing for my services; only let me take your trusty rifle, and I promise you that before sunrise you shall have the whole thing satisfactorily explained.”

“You don’t intend to go alone, do you?”

“I think I can work to a better advantage alone; beside, you had better stay to keep your wife company; she would not like to be left alone under the present circumstances.”

“May Heaven protect you, and bring you safely back.”

After examining the gun and a brace of pistols that I carried in my belt, to see that they were in shooting order, I bade the man good night and left the cabin. The storm was still raging, but this only served to facilitate my progress; had it been light I should have had to proceed with more caution; as it was I was guided by the lights and protected from the view by the darkness. The lights were as bright as when I first saw them, but the shrieks and reports came only at long intervals. Taking a circuitous route, so as to come up in the rear of the church, I strode briskly forward, protecting at the same time the tube of the gun from the rain with the skirt of my coat. After a half hour’s work, with some trouble and great caution, I arrived safely in the rear of the church—then creeping noiselessly forward on my hands and knees, I reached the corner, peering

around which, I saw the lights burning brilliantly on the two newly made graves; I drew my head back and awaited further signs.

Five minutes passed, and I heard no noise of any kind; but at the end of that time, as I was about changing my post of observation to the next corner, I heard a footstep almost within reach of me. I lay perfectly quiet and the footsteps passed by into the lighted space beyond. It was a tall figure dressed in the habiliments of the grave, with bloodshot eyes and pallid face, evidently the same ghost that had but a short time previous visited the cabin, and disturbed my rest.

When it had got within a few feet of the lights it suddenly halted, and began making these horrid noises, which I have already described. Just at this point I raised the rifle to my cheek and fired, and as the clear report rang out on the midnight air, the ghost, the lights, the graves, and everything visible before me instantly disappeared from view, and left me surrounded by a wall of Egyptian-like darkness, with not a sound to break the stillness, save the melancholy sighing of the storm through the treetops over head, and the whistling of the wind around the corner of the church where I lay. My feelings, just at this moment, can better be imagined than described. I was not frightened, for the objects calculated to frighten had disappeared; but I was astonished, bewildered, like one awaking from some strange dream. This last performance was something I had not expected, and I began to wish myself safely out of the bedeviled neighborhood. I arose to my feet, and was about to quiet the premises, when my ears detected a low groan coming from the darkness on my right. I followed in the direction from which the sound came, and had not proceeded far, when the same figure which I had twice before seen, sprang from the ground, and began running in the opposite direction. I followed in swift pursuit, and had the satisfaction of soon overtaking it, and making it my prisoner.

I then led the way back to the cabin, followed by my ghost prisoner, whose arms I had securely fastened with a small cord. We were met at the fence by the farmer and his wife, who had watched a part of my proceedings from the loft window, and who were now almost frantic with joy at my successful adventure. Having entered the cabin, I commenced examining my prisoner. Unwinding the sheet from about his body—for I knew it was a man by his voice—I discovered that instead of a “raw-head and bloody-bones,” he was a genuine human being, and of no small dimensions either. A few drops of turpentine and a rag, soon removed the coat of white paint from his face, and as I gave it the last stroke with a rag, my host threw up his arms in astonishment, and exclaimed:

“Good God! It is my cousin!”

I was not at all surprised at this discovery, for he was the very person whom I had suspected from the first, to be at the bottom of this little mystery. When I had dressed the wound, made in the fleshy part of the arm, where my shot had taken effect, I gave him a seat by the fire, where he sat down and acknowledged the whole thing, to his now enlightened but indignant relatives. He said that the lights and noises were made by combustible and explosive chemicals, so arranged that he could extinguish the one and suppress the other at his will; and that when I fired, he immediately put out the lights and stopped the noises and would have effectually evaded my search, had not the wound, made by the ball in his arm, pained him so severely that he was compelled to discover himself to me by his groans.

I will not give his whole story in detail, but merely the substance, which was about as follows: He said that after obtaining his portion of the estate he had travelled from one place to another, gaming, and keeping all sorts of company, until he had spent the last cent his uncle had left him. Recollecting that the condition of his deceased uncle's will was, "that his cousin should remain on the farm as a tenant for the space of four years, but in case he should leave it before that time had fully expired, the property would then fall to him, he had, therefore, made his way back to the neighborhood and adopted the means that we have already described, for routing his relative and taking possession of his property

Dear reader, I have not told you this story simply to disprove the existence of ghosts, for ghosts may exist in all their "ghostly grandeur" for all that I know; but to show to what miserable subterfuges humanity will sometimes resort to procure the immortal dollar.

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