

# The Ghost at Mannington Hall

*A Norfolk Story*

By Jessie Adelaide Middleton

The recent death of Canon Augustus Jessop, author and antiquary, at the age of ninety, caused widespread regret, for he had interests extending widely beyond his own profession. He was Chaplain in Ordinary to King Edward VII, and was a close friend of Meredith, Tennyson and Browning.

Born at Cheshunt in 1823, he went, as head master of King Edward's School, to Norwich, and from thence onwards he devoted his time and pen largely to a study of East Anglia, about which he wrote *Arcady, for Better or Worse*, and many other well-known books. He believed firmly in small holdings, and took up the cause of the agricultural labourer with zeal.

In 1907 Dr. Jessop was granted a Civil List Pension, in addition to a pension of /too already bestowed on him for his services to Archæology and Literature; and in 1911 he resigned his benefice and went to live at the Chantry, Norwich. When his valuable library was sold, it included a great many Meredith relics, for Dr. Jessop had married Meredith to his second wife, and had been one of his few intimate friends. The relics consisted of autographed first editions of Meredith's books, and a number of letters from the great novelist to Canon and Mrs. Jessop.

I have given these details of Dr. Jessop to lay stress on the fact that he was a well-known man and most distinguished writer and savant, not the kind of man who would invent a fictitious ghost story, or narrate a fable about himself as true. Therefore the ghost story related by him, as follows, which happened in his own experience and was contributed by him, signed with his name in the *Athenæum* of January 1880, is certainly one of the best authenticated on record.

Dr. Jessop begins by saying that on October 10, 1879, he drove over from Norwich to Mannington Hall, to spend the night at Lord Orford's. He arrived at four in the afternoon, and conversed until it was time to dress for dinner. The party consisted of six persons, of whom four had been great travellers. The talk was general, and did not once turn on the supernatural. After dinner they played a rubber of whist, and as two of the party had a good way to drive, the evening broke up at half-past ten.

Dr. Jessop, whose chief object in going over to Mannington Hall had been to examine and take notes on some rare books in the library, asked leave to sit up for some time longer and make some transcripts. Lord Orford wished to let his valet remain in attendance to put out the lights, but Dr. Jessop asked to be alone, as he was likely to be busy until two or three in the morning, and so everybody went to bed and he was the only person left downstairs.

What happened during the watches of the night is best told in his own words. The room in which he was writing was a large one, with a huge fireplace and a grand old chimney, opening out of the library. The books he specially wanted to consult were six in number, and he went into the library to get them, and placed them at his right hand in a little pile and set to work. He worked until nearly one o'clock, and had only one more book left to examine, which he opened and began to read, making extracts as he went along.

“I had been engaged upon it about half-an-hour,” said he, referring to the little book, “and was just beginning to think that my work was drawing to a close, when, as I was actually writing, I saw a large white hand within a foot of my elbow. Turning my head, there sat the figure of a somewhat big man, with his back to the fire, bending slightly over the table, and apparently examining the pile of books that I had been at work upon. The man’s face was turned away from me, but I saw his closely-cut reddish-brown hair, his ear and shaved cheek, the eyebrow, the corner of the right eye, the side of the forehead and the large, high cheekbone. He was dressed in what I can only describe as a kind of ecclesiastical habit of thick corded silk, or some such material, close up to the throat, with a narrow run or edging, of about an inch broad, of velvet or satin, serving as a stand-up collar and fitting close to the chin.

The right hand, which had first attracted attention, was clasping, without any great pressure, on the left hand; both hands were in perfect repose, and the large white veins of the right hand were conspicuous. I remember thinking that the hand was like that of Velasquez’s magnificent “Dead Knight” in the National Gallery. I looked at my visitor for some seconds, and was perfectly sure that he was not a reality. A thousand thoughts came crowding upon me, but not the least feeling of alarm or even uneasiness. Curiosity and a strong interest were uppermost. For an instant I felt eager to make a sketch of my friend, and I looked at a tray on my right for a pencil. Then I thought, ‘Upstairs I have a sketch-book. Shall I fetch it?’ There he sat, and I was fascinated; afraid, not of his staying, but lest he should go.

“Stopping in my writing, I lifted my left hand from the paper, stretched it out to the pile of books and moved the top one. I cannot explain why I did this. My arm passed in front of the figure, and it vanished. I was simply disappointed and nothing more. I went on with my writing as if nothing had happened perhaps for another five minutes, and had actually got to the last few words of what I had determined to extract, when the figure appeared again, exactly in the same place and same attitude as before. I saw the hands close to my own. I turned my head again to examine him more closely, and I was framing a sentence to address him, when I discovered that I did not dare speak. I was afraid of the sound of my own voice. There he sat and there sat I. I turned my head again to my work, and finished writing the two or three words I still had to inscribe. The paper and my notes are at this moment before me, and exhibit not the slightest tremor or nervousness. I could point out the words I was writing when the phantom came and when he disappeared. Having finished my task, I shut the book and threw it on the table. It made a slight noise as it fell, and the figure vanished.

“Throwing myself back in my chair, I sat for some seconds looking at the fire with a curious mixture of feeling, and I remember wondering whether my friend would come again, and if he did, whether he would hide the fire from me. Then first there stole upon me a dread and a suspicion that I was beginning to lose my nerve. I remember yawning; then I rose, lit my bedroom candle, took my books into the inner library, mounted the chair as before, and replaced five of the volumes. The sixth I brought back and laid upon the table where I had been writing when the phantom did me the honour to appear to me. By this time I had lost all sense of uneasiness. I blew out the four candles and marched off to bed, where I slept the sleep of the just, or the guilty—I know not which—but I slept very soundly.

“This is a simple and unvarnished narrative. Explanation, theory or inference I leave to others.”