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NAXOS
AudioBooks

COMPLETE
CLASSICS
UNABRIDGED

M.R. James

GHOST STORIES OF AN ANTIQUARY

Read by **David Timson** and **Stephen Critchlow**

CD 1

- | | | |
|----|---|------|
| 1 | Ghost Stories of An Antiquary by M.R. James – Canon Alberic’s Scrapbook read by David Timson | 4:21 |
| 2 | Before the expiration of the two hours... | 3:56 |
| 3 | At once all Dennistoun’s cherished dreams... | 4:24 |
| 4 | Such a collection Dennistoun had hardly dreamed of... | 4:55 |
| 5 | I entirely despair of conveying by any words... | 5:01 |
| 6 | All this time a growing feeling of discomfort... | 4:49 |
| 7 | He died that summer; his daughter married... | 3:54 |
| 8 | Lost Hearts read by David Timson | 4:12 |
| 9 | It seemed a little odd that he should have asked... | 4:30 |
| 10 | The remainder of the evening was spent by Stephen... | 4:48 |
| 11 | On the following evening the usual duet... | 3:45 |
| 12 | The wind had fallen, and there was a still night... | 3:05 |
| 13 | On the table in Mr Abney’s study certain papers were found... | 4:25 |
| 14 | The Mezzotint read by Stephen Critchlow | 4:25 |
| 15 | The only item with which I am concerned... | 4:19 |
| 16 | Hall in Mr Williams’s college was at seven. | 4:50 |
| 17 | ‘Well,’ said Nisbet, ‘I have here a view of a country-house...’ | 3:34 |
| 18 | ‘Now what do you mean to do?’ he said. | 3:27 |

Total time on CD 1: 77:00

CD 2

| | | |
|----|--|------|
| 1 | There was the house, as before under the waning moon... | 2:45 |
| 2 | This looked like business... | 3:42 |
| 3 | The Ash-Tree read by David Timson | 5:02 |
| 4 | Mainly on this evidence... | 4:33 |
| 5 | One of the men went to fetch the parson... | 4:58 |
| 6 | This is all that need be quoted from Mr Crome's papers. | 4:06 |
| 7 | One morning (it was in 1754) Sir Richard woke... | 4:37 |
| 8 | The parlour contained the family books... | 4:48 |
| 9 | Thou shalt seek me in the morning... | 4:50 |
| 10 | Number 13 read by David Timson | 4:19 |
| 11 | Supper-time was approaching... | 5:09 |
| 12 | Anderson had not time to do more than glance... | 5:09 |
| 13 | Now came a distant step in the street... | 4:51 |
| 14 | At supper he found himself next to the landlord. | 4:54 |
| 15 | Anderson finished his letters, ordered in whisky and soda... | 5:01 |
| 16 | Suddenly the crying or singing voice... | 3:54 |
| 17 | The men nodded, and the younger stepped forward... | 5:02 |

Total time on CD 2: 77:59

CD 3

| | | |
|----|--|------|
| 1 | Count Magnus read by David Timson | 4:48 |
| 2 | They received Mr Wraxall with great kindness... | 4:28 |
| 3 | I find that early on the following day Mr Wraxall... | 4:32 |
| 4 | It could not be denied that this threw a rather lurid light... | 5:24 |
| 5 | 'You understand that they were sure these men were dead...' | 4:43 |
| 6 | Mr Wraxall noted the finely-worked and massive steel padlocks... | 4:53 |
| 7 | Poor Mr Wraxall! He set out on his journey... | 4:43 |
| 8 | 'Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad' read by Stephen Critchlow | 5:27 |
| 9 | '-I hold that any semblance...' | 4:41 |
| 10 | Few people can resist the temptation... | 4:46 |
| 11 | Parkins had, in fact, very little time for dressing. | 5:04 |
| 12 | Quickly as it had risen, the wind did not fall at once. | 4:46 |
| 13 | The scraping of match on box and the glare of light... | 3:59 |
| 14 | Parkins was on the point of answering... | 4:08 |
| 15 | At this point Parkins was in favour of sending the boy home... | 4:27 |
| 16 | The latter was unwontedly silent and pensive at dinner... | 5:25 |

Total time on CD 3: 76:27

CD 4

| | | |
|----|---|------|
| 1 | Parkins, who very much dislikes being questioned... | 4:03 |
| 2 | The Treasure of Abbot Thomas read by David Timson | 4:39 |
| 3 | A sad perplexity it had been to our investigator... | 4:56 |
| 4 | I labour under a grave disadvantage as narrator of this story... | 4:16 |
| 5 | 'Well, Somerton,' said Mr Gregory, as he crossed the room... | 3:02 |
| 6 | 3: This was Mr Somerton's story: 'You know roughly...' | 4:51 |
| 7 | 'Blank as I felt and must have looked for the first few minutes...' | 4:44 |
| 8 | Then I thought to myself, "Wasn't there some allusion..." | 5:09 |
| 9 | 'Next, what about the well? There was not much doubt...' | 3:58 |
| 10 | 'Half aloud I counted the steps as we went down...' | 3:55 |
| 11 | 'Well, I felt to the right, and my fingers touched something...' | 2:53 |
| 12 | 'Well, sir,' said Brown, speaking low and nervously... | 3:26 |
| 13 | 'Well, there is my story; and, if you don't believe it...' | 1:55 |

Total time on CD 4: 52:01

Total time on CD 1-4: 4:43:27

M.R. James

(1862–1936)

GHOST STORIES OF AN ANTIQUARY

When M.R. James was asked if he believed in ghosts, he said: 'I am prepared to consider evidence and accept it if it satisfies me.' This careful, scholarly answer tells us a great deal about the creator of some of the greatest ghost stories in the English language. James was very like a character common in his ghost stories, an academic combining a mixture of innocence with obsessive scholarship.

Montague Rhodes James was born in 1862, the son of a rector, and he spent virtually his whole life in the groves of academe: from Eton School he went to King's College, Cambridge, where he obtained a double first in classics, and took root there, being appointed Junior Dean before rising to the post of Vice Chancellor in 1913. His study was the Apocrypha and medieval manuscripts. In 1918 he returned to Eton as Provost, and in 1930 he received the Order of Merit. He died peacefully in 1936.

His quiet, contented and uneventful life outside his studies consisted of bicycle rides, church music and games of patience,

seemingly the only frisson being provided by the telling of ghost stories at Christmas to a group of friends after dinner in a room lit by a single candle.

James's literary ambitions began and ended with ghost stories: 'I have never cared to try another kind,' he admitted, but in specialising he made the genre his own. He took the 18th century fictional convention of horror stories, known as 'Gothic', from their settings of dark ruined Castles or damp claustrophobic dungeons where danger or the unknown lurked, and showed that the past can have a more disturbing hold over the present than that conjured by those stereotypes. James wrote: 'In the infancy of the art [of writing ghost stories] we needed the haunted castle on a beetling rock to put us in the right frame [of mind],' but, he expounded, a ghost is much more effective in a setting that is 'contemporary and even ordinary.' His ghosts are more of a presence than the Gothic ghosts, who were often pale and only partially visible

spirits. James's ghosts are tangible and often touched before they are seen. He was convinced his apparitions should always be terrifying and never benign, and to achieve this he was not averse to using some of the old familiar trappings of the Gothic genre. Cloaks, hoods, talons, tentacles, incredibly hairy faces, the foul smell of evil – all pervade his stories, creating, as the story proceeds, a cumulative horror that makes them the best of the genre.

In some stories, a seemingly harmless object acts as a catalyst to the story; in *The Mezzotint*, an indifferent print of a manor house seems to have a life of its own. Every time anyone looks at it, something has subtly changed – is it imagination or the supernatural? In *Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to you, My Lad*, the object is an ancient bronze whistle that terrifies Professor Parkins to near insanity. This is considered by many to be James's masterpiece. The story is set in his native Suffolk, and the Professor is quite possibly something of a self-portrait.

There is a recognisable formula to James's stories exemplified in *Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad*. They have as a background the quaint archaic world of academe or the church, seemingly safe

and secluded from the outside world. A meddling academic in the process of seeking an ancient artefact disturbs a restless supernatural creature from the past seeking to avenge an ancient crime or to exert a satanic influence on the present.

His tales are covered with an intellectual veneer, specialised knowledge and quotations from Latin figure prominently, but the heart of the story is usually primal; a force from the distant past, its origins lost in folklore. Mr Abney's exploration of Pagan rites and the Orphic and Bacchic mysteries is the gruesome theme of *Lost Hearts*, whilst *The Ash Tree* has pagan references throughout, dealing with witchcraft in Bury St. Edmunds, an area of Suffolk notorious in the seventeenth century for its witch trials.

His narrators are academic, but acquired knowledge proves to be no protection against the inexplicable or the unknown. James can even at times display a dry sense of humour, as in *Canon Alberic's Scrapbook*, where the 'crime' of the Canon is the destruction of a priceless old book, to provide material for his scrapbook – a sin M.R. James, as an antiquarian, could not forgive. He believed that the past never leaves us, and should be treated with the utmost respect.

James writes with a studied simplicity. His stories are deliberately low-key in tone, sometimes prosaic, their relaxed scholarly style a distraction from the underlying dark mood of sombre expectation. The plots unfold at a casual pace, filled out with tangential references of an academic nature deceiving the reader into a sense of false security, until he pounces, revealing the story's awful secret: a ghost, or spectre, or creature of the night. James doesn't expand on his creatures, they appear and disappear with scarcely a word of explanation, but they linger menacingly in the reader's imagination long after the story ends. In fact, James lets our imaginations do the work. He merely suggests, gives a glimpse of the horror. It is we who create them fully in our minds.

We are often left at the end of these stories with the feeling that it's not over, as in *The Treasure of Abbot Thomas*, where the greed for treasure drives Mr Somerton literally into the arms (or tentacles) of a supernatural creature. Although he seals up the treasure again in its hiding-place, the reader is left asking, will he be safe? Or has he released some force that can't be contained, as in *Count Magnus* where Mr Wraxall is literally hunted and haunted to death.

The strength of these stories lies in the fact that James, rather than using unconvincing pedantry in the form of invented or archaic terminology, which he believed always failed to convince a reader, uses instead references based on genuine scholarship. It's what one would expect from a professional antiquarian and a museum administrator.

James set out a list of 'dos' and 'don'ts' when it came to creating ghost stories. He warns against revealing too much too soon, or giving way to excess, citing *Dracula* (1897) as a story where the horrors are like butter 'spread far too thick.' Yet at the same time, he says, there must be *plenty* of horror in the story – 'all writers of ghost stories desire to make their readers flesh creep' – though he warns against mixing sex with horror, which he believed threatened to 'spoil the whole business.' He makes the formula sound easy, and he had many imitators, but James remains the master of tapping into our inner fears, the dark places of our minds and souls, our unconsciousness, where we are pursued by a thing unknown, the inadmissible, perhaps the secret self; the primal fear of things that go bump in the night.

Notes by David Timson



David Timson has made over 1,000 broadcasts for BBC Radio Drama. For Naxos AudioBooks he wrote *The History of the Theatre*, which won an award for most original production from the Spoken Word Publishers Association in 2001. He has also directed for Naxos AudioBooks four Shakespeare plays, including *King Richard III* (with Kenneth Branagh), which won Best Drama Award from the SWPA in 2001. In 2002 he won the Audio of the Year Award for his reading of *A Study in Scarlet*. He reads the entire Sherlock Holmes canon for Naxos AudioBooks.



Stephen Critchlow is a popular and versatile actor who has enjoyed a wide variety of work, including *Hamlet* and *Pygmalion* in The West End, *Cyrano De Bergerac* at The Royal National Theatre and playing Kenneth Horne in *Round The Horne Revisited on Tour*. His television and film work includes *Cider with Rosie*, *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, *The Prince and The Pauper*, *Heartbeat*, *The Calcium Kid* and *Churchill The Hollywood Years*. He has been in over 200 productions as a member of the BBC Radio Drama Company and has recorded William Blake poetry for Naxos AudioBooks.

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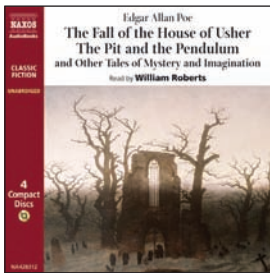
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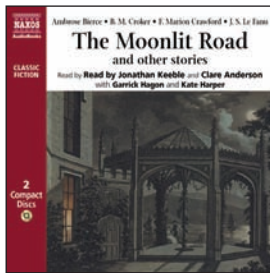
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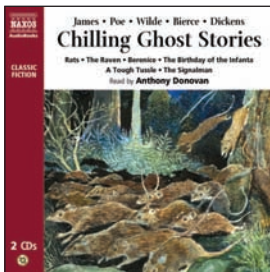
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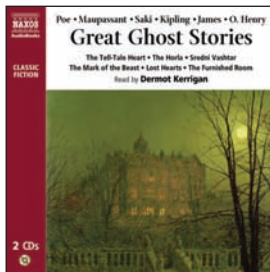
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GHOST STORIES OF AN ANTIQUARY

Includes **Canon Alberic's Scrapbook • The Mezzotint
Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad** and others

Read by **David Timson** and **Stephen Critchlow**

The powerful sense of evil – darkness, creepy hairy presences, cloaks, hoods, talons and tentacles – pervades these classic ghost stories by M.R. James. A Cambridge scholar himself, James explored what happens when academics dabble in things they don't understand and unleash forces of which they know nothing. The titles in *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* range from witchcraft to the occult, and tap into our primal fear of things that go bump in the night. They are recognised as the best of their genre.

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