



## **Ghost Stories of an Antiquary**

*M.R. James , E.F. Bleiler (introduction) , James McBride (illustrator)*

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**Ghost Stories of an Antiquary** M.R. James , E.F. Bleiler (introduction) , James McBride (illustrator)  
Eight classics by great Edwardian scholar and storyteller. "Number Thirteen," "The Mezzotint," "Canon Alberic's Scrapbook," more. Renowned for their wit, erudition and suspense, these stories are each masterfully constructed and represent a high achievement in the ghost genre. New introduction by E. F. Bleiler. 4 plates by James McBride.

## **Ghost Stories of an Antiquary Details**

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Author : M.R. James , E.F. Bleiler (introduction) , James McBride (illustrator)

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## From Reader Review Ghost Stories of an Antiquary for online ebook

### DeAnna Knippling says

While I enjoyed the stories here, I didn't find them at all scary or really all that dark. These are tales to be told of a Christmas eve around the first in the UK, and for that, they're probably perfect. That being said, they're perfectly readable and enjoyable if you're in a fireplace/campfire mood.

Reading these now, after recently going through a lot of the classics of the modern horror genre, it seems like a lot of modern writers are stealing from MR James but adding their own twists to make the stories scary -- deeper characters, more detailed setting -- turning short stories into novels. Liz Hand's Wylding Hall comes to mind. Peter Straub's books after Floating Dragon, maybe. The "quiet horror" books that seem to lean on one last twist at the end. (The books where you're not quite sure what happened seem to go back more to The Turn of the Screw.)

I'm really glad I read this, but...honestly, of the earlier horror/ghost stories in the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries, I'm still going to have to admit that I enjoy a few other writers more.

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### Obsidian says

Please note that I gave this 3.5 stars but since Goodreads does not have half stars I rounded up to 4 stars.

These are not your typical horror stories. I did like them though. James has a subtle style to his writing and stories. I think that he assumes his readers are going to imagine more things that can be worse than what he will write so a lot of things are left to your imagination in some of the stories.

The stories are the following:

"Canon Alberic's Scrap-Book"-3 stars. Not very scary. And I am going to say I did a lot of wait what while reading this one.

"Lost Hearts"- 5 stars. I loved this one from beginning to end. So good! Maybe because once you as a reader realize what is going on you want to keep the main character safe (who was a boy at the time of the story).

"The Mezzotint"-3 stars. This was honestly pretty boring to me. Not terrible, just not very interesting.

"The Ash-tree"-3 stars. I thought it was an interesting idea that fell kind of flat. This one I had to read twice because I found myself skimming too much to get to the punchline.

"Number 13"-5 stars. This one was really good and I have to say nothing with 13 in it is ever going to be good news!

"Count Magnus"-2.5 stars. Once again, just not very interesting to me and I did find myself skimming this story.

"Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad"-3 stars. I don't understand what was going on in this story at all. I think the unknown is supposed to be scary in this one, but to me it seemed easily gotten rid of (the big bad) that I don't know how scared I was supposed to be by it.

"The Treasure of Abbot Thomas"-2.5 stars. Wish that maybe Lost Hearts had been the last one for this collection instead of this one. Once again though I understand what M.R. James was trying to do, I just found it lackluster in execution.

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### **Tania Donald says**

As Leonardo is to painting, so M R James is to the short ghost story. He really is that good. These stories are like beautifully crafted little gems, rich in tiny, exquisite detail, and sparkling with dark beauty.

There is an indefinable rare something that marks out the greatest writers of supernatural fiction. H P Lovecraft had it, and M R James had it. It's a kind of mood, an atmosphere, but it's more than that.

Effortlessly, these writers draw you into a world where the most strange and terrible things are entirely plausible; plausible, horrifying and delicious.

My words can't do justice to M R James. I can only urge you, if you are someone who enjoys tales of the supernatural, to read any of his stories that you can get your hands on.

(There is also a very fine audio-book of this available to download for free at [www.librivox.org](http://www.librivox.org))

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### **Andrea Torrejón says**

I never liked horror stories, because I'm a sissy and I get very, VERY scared.

And I have nightmares and shit, and I can't sleep alone or with the lights out.

But lately, I'm really scared of the world. The politics, the social situation, the environmental state, the growth of extremism and terrorism, the floating certainty of war, injustice, and greed.

So suddenly, ghosts, ouija boards, demons, and spectres don't seem so scary.

They do make my hair stand on end, but they have become a refuge, a fantasy world where the fear is present but less palatable.

And this book was an excellent escape.

The way M.R James build a story full of ordinary, believable situations to then pour droplets of incredibly powerful visions is absolutely perfect. The horror comes through the senses, not only sight (we are mostly used to that type of horror thanks to Hollywood), but though touch, and smell and taste, and that feeling that someone is staring at you from the corner of your eye.

This compilation was supposed to be told, spoken out, not read. So the use of language is so colloquial and well put, you can almost hear the words inside your head, while your brain transforms them into images, and smells, and creaking sounds against your window.

A masterpiece.

Also, if you are interested in M.R James, I recommend (as it was firstly recommended to me) the documentary "M.R. James Ghost Writer", by the great Marc Gatiss. Excellent combination.

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## **Sean says**

This is great collection of 7 classic ghost stories. Most relate to traveling scholars and their ghostly encounters. My only complaint is that many of these stories are very similar. Out of the 7, the story Number 13 is my favorite. This is a nice quick read if you are in the mood for a few really good ghost stories.

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## **Bionic Jean says**

**Ghost Stories of an Antiquary** is the first collection of stories by M. R. James, published in 1904, although some had been previously published in magazines. The next collection from 1922 is often nowadays combined with this volume. Montague Rhodes James was a noted medieval scholar and provost of Kings College, Cambridge. His scholarly work remains highly respected in academic circles.

Interestingly one incident in M. R. James's life could have come straight from his stories. His discovery of a manuscript fragment led to excavations in the ruins of the abbey at Bury St Edmunds, West Suffolk, in 1902, in which the graves of several twelfth-century abbots were rediscovered, having been lost since the Dissolution.

Nowadays however, he is best remembered for his short stories, which he published as M. R. James. These are classic understated Victorian ghost stories. Many of them were written to be read aloud, as there was a tradition in Victorian families of reading spooky tales aloud on Christmas Eve.

Mood and atmosphere are paramount in M. R. James's short stories. His work could be seen as a restrained English version of Edgar Allan Poe. Everything is understated; where there is horror it is rarely explicit. The terror lies in the power of suggestion and forboding.

There is often a quiet scholarly person as the main protagonist, and the settings are often rural, or a musty old library or church. This lulls the reader into a false sense of security thereby emphasising the horror of the supernatural forces which are inevitable in an M R James story. The situation is usually quite prosaic to start with, and the author moves very slowly piling on his tension step by step.

This collection comprises:

*"Canon Alberic's Scrap-Book"*  
*"Lost Hearts"*  
*"The Mezzotint"*  
*"The Ash-Tree"*  
*"Number 13"*  
*"Count Magnus"*  
*"Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad"*  
*"The Treasure of Abbot Thomas"*

The second collection entitled "More Ghost Stories" comprises:

*"A School Story"*  
*"The Rose Garden"*

*"The Tractate Middoth"*  
*"Casting the Runes"*  
*"The Stalls of Barchester Cathedral"*  
*"Martin's Close"*  
*"Mr Humphreys and his Inheritance"*

**Edited:**

Some stories from **Ghost Stories of an Antiquary** are reviewed separately. Here are links to my reviews of these:

[Lost Hearts](#)

[The Treasure of Abbot Thomas](#)

[The Tractate Middoth](#)

[The Stalls of Barchester Cathedral](#)

Here are links to my reviews of other stories by M.R. James:

[A Warning to the Curious and Other Ghost Stories](#)

[A Warning to the Curious \(the individual story\)](#)

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**Bill Kerwin says**

This is M. R. James first book of ghost stories, containing eight of his best. I believe six of these eight are among the twenty best tales of ghostly terror ever written--and the other two tales are very good too. If you like traditional ghost stories that unnerve the reader subtly by suggestion and indirection, this is a book you should read.

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**Mike (the Paladin) says**

I'd read some of these before and most are excellent. James has an imagination that can draw you in...and then take advantage of your vulnerabilities to things that may or may not go bump in the night.

You as always find reliably creepy stories from James and I can recommend this if you're looking for ghost/supernatural stories.

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**Char says**

[Ghost Stories of an Antiquary by M.R. James](#)

A fantastic collection of creepy atmospheric horror tales written back in the day. I felt that these stories lost nothing with the passage of time. In fact, I appreciated the fact that these tales weren't gory at all. I guess I've gotten used to explicit scenes in my horror, and these shorts served to remind me that blood and guts don't necessarily have to play a part. My imagination often supplies something scarier than the author may have intended and I like that. I highly recommend this excellent, (free for Kindle), collection.

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### **Quirkyreader says**

Get ready for the shivers when you read these creepers.

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### **Michael says**

Full review from Badelynge

I love a good ghost story. M.R.James is one of the best at the short form of the genre. *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* is packed with some of his best. All the stories here were written between 1894 and 1904 and were originally read to the author's friends at Christmas at Kings College, Cambridge where James was a noted British medieval scholar. I'd guess the best way to experience these chilling little stories would be to have them read to you on a dark night, in the depths of winter, perhaps on Christmas Eve itself. It is probably easier to imagine, listening to the words, that the story is being told to you by someone who has heard the story from another, and that such a tale might be true - just for a short time anyway. James usually cleverly distances the storyteller from the actual protagonists who are often of a scholarly type, quite sanguine (at least at first) in their rejection of the supernatural.

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### **Terry says**

This volume contains eight tasty little nuggets of supernatural horror that I found very satisfying. In each of them the story is told second or even third hand by a genial narrator whose acquaintances, who are themselves of a decidedly scholarly bent, have been the victims of supernatural intrusion into our world. Often the stories revolve around an ancient artifact able to invoke the otherworldly that is discovered by these particularly luckless individuals (though they often feel themselves lucky indeed when they first make their discoveries). The tales are all good, but my favourites were 'Canon Alberic's Scrap-book', 'Lost Hearts', 'The Mezzotint', and 'Count Magnus'. I found myself thinking of both Lovecraft (in James' use of made-up manuscripts and a reliance on protagonists of a learned bent whose curiosity proves to be their bane) and Clark Ashton-Smith (though with prose that was a little less flowery) though I think James is a much better stylist than the former and a little less given to the more extreme flights of fancy of the latter.

'Canon Alberic's Scrap-book' – An antiquary discovers a scrap-book of ancient manuscripts compiled by the titular Canon Alberic in the 17th century that is in the keeping of the sacristan of a church in France that he is studying. One picture, "The dispute of Solomon with a demon of the night", proves to be particularly compelling...and why is the sacristan so eager to get rid of a book so obviously of great value? Great evocation of mood and the way in which the supernatural creature manifests itself was suitably creepy.

'Lost Hearts' – A rather moving tale of revenge from beyond the grave and the perils of devoting oneself to the arcane teachings of the ancients in the hopes of gaining eternal life. I knew where this one was going

pretty much after the first paragraph, but I heartily enjoyed the ride.

'The Mezzotint' – I really liked the interesting way in which the artifact in question here, the mezzotint of the title, manifested the supernatural and the foreboding sense of a quiet yet unstoppable horror that was the result.

'The Ash-tree' – A nobleman and his descendants find that being the star witness in a witch trial probably isn't a good idea. Good creepy/gross factor with the creatures invoked for vengeance.

'Number 13' – What happens when you book a room in an inn that used to belong to a man accused of having been an alchemist and magician several generations ago? Nothing good, especially if you rent the room right next to the one in which he mysteriously died. Space and time have a funny way of bending and twisting when the undead get involved.

'Count Magnus' – The titular Count reminded me a bit of Vigo the Carpathian from Ghost Busters 2: he was a mean-spirited son of a bitch who liked to torture people in his spare time and go on fun little trips with names like "the Black Pilgrimage". Perhaps it's wisest if you're a travel writer getting good copy from his native village to leave the crypt where he's entombed alone. Just sayin'.

'Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad' – Ah skeptics...they always learn their lesson in the end, don't they? Well, they do in these kind of stories anyway. If you're kind of a priggish and pedantic professor going on a holiday to sharpen up your golf game (golf is a re-occurring motif in these stories and I don't think James was a fan) don't promise to do some investigating of the local Templar preceptory for a colleague, and if you do for God's sake don't muck around with anything you find there. If you're lucky you'll run into an old military type who doesn't trust papists.

'The Treasure of Abbot Thomas' – When the Abbot of a 16th century monastery basically dares you, through the enciphered clues he left behind in some striking stained glass windows, to uncover his hidden treasure don't do it. Trust me on this.

I like the way in which James gives us enough of a glimpse of the ghosts and undead horrors he unleashes in his stories to avoid Lovecraft's almost laughable (to me at least) approach of "oh, it was so horrible I can't even begin to describe it, just trust me it was really, really, really, mind-crushingly horrible!" and yet was sufficiently vague to leave enough of the horror to the imagination of the reader. The charming, almost homely, voice of the narrator was also a nice contrast to the ultimate invocation of otherworldly menace in the tales. All in all a really solid collection of old-school ghost stories that may not leave you cringing in terror, but you may end up looking over your shoulder from time to time. And you'll definitely take greater care the next time that weird old manuscript seems to fortuitously land in your lap.

Also posted at Shelf Inflicted

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**Nikoleta says**

?ποιος θ?λει να τρομ?ξει πολ?, καλ?τερα να επιλ?ξει ?να ?λλο βιβλ?ο και ?χι το Ιστορ?ες φαντασμ?των εν?ς αρχαιοδ?φη, καθ?ς ε?ναι περισσ?τερο μυστ?ριου παρ? τρ?μου, ?σως την εποχ? που γρ?φτηκε να θεωρο?νταν τρ?μουν... δεν γνωρ?ζω. Ο τρ?μος μει?νεται με πολλο?ς τρ?πους. Πρ?τον ο ?ρωας που ?χει α?σιο τ?λος στο δι?γημα, η σωτηρ?α του προαναγγ?λλετε με κ?ποιο τρ?πο

στην ιστορ?α μ?σω του αφηγητ?, ο οπο?ος αναφ?ρει ?τι την ιστορ?α που μας διηγε?ται την ?κουσε απ? τον ?διο τον ?ρωα. Δε?τερον η τρομακτικ? ατμ?σφαιρα δεν ε?ναι δυνατ?ν να μας κερδ?σει, δι?τι η τρομ?ρα αποσιωπ?ται ε?τε επειδ? ο αφηγητ?ς δεν ε?ναι παρ?ν σε ?να φ?νο οπ?τε δεν ?χουμε ιδ?α τη συμβα?νει, -καθ?ς υποτ?θεται ?τι ε?ναι αληθιν? γεγον?τα που τα ?μαθε με κ?ποιο τρ?πο, οπ?τε ο νεκρ?ς π?ς να διηγηθε? τη β?ωσε;- ε?τε επειδ? οι ?ρωες με καλ? τ?λος ?χι απλ?ς βγα?νουν αλ?βητοι αλλ? ?τι βι?σαν ?ταν φευγαλ?ο, στιγμια?ο. Ε?ναι βεβα?α και ο εφησυχασμ?ς απ? την αρχ? ?τι του τα δηγ?θηκε ο ?διος ο ?ρωας οπ?τε ναι, ξ?ρουμε ?τι ?ζησε και ε?ναι καλ?. Κατ? τα ?λλα μου ?ρεσαν π?ρα πολ? αυτ?ς οι ιστορ?ες, εξαιρετικ? πρωτ?τυπες με εντον?τατη δ?ση μυστ?ριου κυρ?ως ειδικ? ?ταν αφ?νει αυτ? τα αναπ?ντητα ερωτηματικ?, κανε?ς δεν μπορε? να ξ?ρει... να ε?ναι σ?γουρος τι συν?βη ... κανε?ς δεν μπορε? να ε?ναι τελικ? ασφαλ?ς.... ?σως θα προτιμο?σα λ?γο λιγ?τερες περιγραφ?ς του κ?θε χ?ρου που εξελ?σσονται αλλ? συμβ?λουν και αυτ?ς στη δημιουργ?α ατμ?σφαιρας..

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## Oscar says

M.R. James fue uno de los mejores escritores dedicados al peculiar género de las *ghost stories*, o historias de fantasmas. Realmente, no se dedicaba a ello profesionalmente; creaba sus historias para contarlas a sus amigos y conocidos, siendo para él más una afición con la que disfrutar enormemente, eso sí, haciéndonoslo pasar "mal". Afortunadamente, se fueron publicando porque se trata, indiscutiblemente, de uno de los maestros del relato breve.

Sus cuentos son una delicia escalofriante. M.R. James fue un erudito y arqueólogo de fama reconocida, miembro del Eton College, algo que sale a relucir tanto en el contenido de sus relatos como en la calidad de los mismos. Las historias escritas por James están ambientadas habitualmente en antiguas catedrales, ruinas olvidadas y parajes lúgubres, y nos son relatadas de manera fina y elegante, como cabe esperar de un miembro de Eton. Más que sustos, la sensación que nos transmiten son de un sutil horror, jugando un importante papel la imaginación del lector.

Estos son los cuentos reunidos en 'Historias de fantasmas de una anticuario':

- **EL ÁLBUM DEL CANÓNIGO ALBERICO.** Denniston viaja a Saint Bertrand de Comminges, un viejo pueblo situado en los Pirineos, para recabar información de la iglesia del lugar. No contaba con encontrar nada valioso, hasta que llega a sus manos un viejo libro con unas extrañas láminas...

- **CORAZONES PERDIDOS.** Stephen, un joven huérfano, acaba de llegar a la mansión de su primo, el señor Abney, algo que extraña a la vecindad, por el carácter arisco del tal señor Abney. Stephen irá descubriendo la horrible pesadilla en la que se ha visto envuelto. Imprescindible.

- **EL GRABADO.** El señor Williams es un gran aficionado a adquirir viejos grabados y estampas. Como es habitual, recibe un catálogo del señor Britnell, sugiriendo éste que examine cierto grabado que puede ser de su interés. Dicho grabado contiene la vista de una casa de principios del siglo XVIII, y al final lo solicita, junto a otros artículos del catálogo. Poco a poco irá desvelándose la naturaleza del grabado. Otro cuento imprescindible, con imágenes verdaderamente escalofriantes.

- **EL FRESNO.** Existe un gran fresno junto a la casa de Castingham Hall, cuya historia está relacionada con cierta mujer acusada de bruja.

- LA HABITACIÓN NÚMERO 13. El señor Anderson viaja a Viborg, Dinamarca, para continuar su investigación sobre la Iglesia de este país, hospedándose para ello en el "León de Oro", concretamente en la habitación número 12. Al subir de cenar, se orienta observando los números de las habitaciones... 14,13, y, por fin, la 12. Cuál no será su sorpresa al enterarse de que el hotel no tiene habitación número 13... Otra muestra del la maestría de James.

- EL CONDE MAGNUS. El señor Wraxall viaja a Suecia con motivo del libro de viajes que está escribiendo. Una de sus paradas es la mansión de De la Gardie, toda una antigüedad. Entre las reliquias se encuentra el retrato de Magnus, el primer De la Gardie, por quien siente un vivo interés; incluso querrá visitar el mausoleo de la familia...

- ¡SILBA Y ACUDIRÉ! Parkins, profesor del St. James College, decide pasar unos días jugando al golf en la costa, concretamente en Burnstow. Al enterarse de la noticia, un colega le pedirá que eche una mirada a cierto convento de templarios, para saber si vale la pena excavar allí más adelante. Será cumpliendo este deseo cuando Parkins encuentre un curioso silbato... Estupendo relato.

- EL TESORO DEL ABAD THOMAS. Cuenta la leyenda que el abad Thomas ocultó un tesoro, dejando ciertas pistas para que fuese encontrado. Y en ello anda el anticuario Somerton, al que seguiremos en su investigación, pesquisa tras pesquisa. ¡Cuánto hubiese dado por no hallar el secreto! Imprescindible.

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### **Ben Thurley says**

These stories are a delight – finely-crafted ghost stories from the turn of the twentieth century, subversively witty and proceeding to build suspense, menace and even outright horror by insinuation and implication much more than bare narration or depiction.

The stories aren't particularly revolutionary, typically beginning with an energetic and atmospheric description of the setting before introducing an urbane and often scholarly narrator who will interact with a relic that provides a doorway to supernatural influences best left undisturbed. However, they are so nicely-wrought, and the narrative voice such a pleasing blend of self-effacement, scepticism and credulity, and the stories do such a great job of stimulating the reader's imagination (without overdoing it), that it's hard not to just lose yourself in them.

I've never thought of myself as a fan of the ghost story, but I'm a definite convert to M.R. James.

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### **Danielle The Book Huntress (Back to the Books) says**

I first read MR James several years ago, and he still remains my favorite ghost story writer. This volume has a few of his best stories in it. MR James was an antiquarian (studied, translated and catalogued old books, particularly religious texts), so he knew all about dusty books, religious tomes, in particular, and old places with plenty of history and mystery, and that's evident in his stories. Some might not get the narration style, but many of these were invented for telling instead of reading. He had a circle of friends that would get together on cold winter nights and share ghost stories. I need friends like that. I like the fact that each has a nice build of tension and a dramatic conclusion.

Here are my thoughts about the stories in this book:

"Canon Alberic's Scrap-Book"--This tells of a man's memory of a beastly creature that he captured in the back of a religious manuscript and that gave me a shudder.

"Lost Hearts"--Creepy story about child killer who gets his comeuppance

"The Mezzotint"--If a picture could be alive and tell us a story what would it look like? That's what this story is about. It's really chilling to think of, especially when it's showing something quite disturbing.

"The Ash-tree"--Yeah, that's pretty icky. Let's face it, insects and arachnids have an inherent creep factor. Combine that with a vengeful spirit in a tree and no sleep for me tonight.

"Number 13"--Imagine you stay in a hotel room and hear ungodly sounds from a room next door that doesn't exist, and something doesn't want you to find out if and what happened in that room. Yeah, creepy.

"Count Magnus"--I didn't quite get this one, but I felt it was a bit of a vampire story. My second least favorite.

"Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad""--This was my first story by MR James that I read in an anthology and I was hooked. A ghost is basically stalking the narrator and even comes so far as to share the room with him. The tension in this story is great, right up to a thrilling conclusion.

"The Treasure of Abbot Thomas"--My least favorite. I had to make about four attempts to read this. It's just a bit too academic for me. It's about a word puzzle used to find an obscure treasure. The payoff really isn't that satisfying.

As I found out with the group read, MR James is not for everyone. He's a bit too fussy and antiquated for some modern readers. However, I love the old guy and I will always look forward to reading his ghost stories.

Overall rating: **4.25/5.0 stars.**

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## Graziano says

### CANON ALBERIC'S SCRAP-BOOK

'They were in the sitting-room of the house, a small, high chamber with a stone floor, full of moving shadows cast by a wood-fire that flickered on a great heart.' (p.13)

Canon Alberic's Scrap-Book was first published in 1904, although it was written in 1894.

The story is set in southern France.

An English tourist is photographing the interior of the cathedral of Saint-Bernard-de-Comminges at the foot of Pyrenees, when the cathedral's sacristan tries to sell him a strange book. The Englishman is impressed by a drawing in the book. After buying it, he returns to his room, and ...

'his attention was caught by an object lying on the red cloth just by his left elbow. ...

A pen wiper? No, no such thing in the house.

A rat? No, too black.

A large spider? I trust to goodness not - no. ...

God! a hand like the hand in that picture!' (p. 23-4)

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## LOST HEARTS and THE MEZZOTINT

‘it’s a funny thing to me how them marks and scratches can ‘a’ come there - too high up for any cat or dog to have made them, much less a rat ...’ (p.42)

Lost Hearts (1904) by Montague Rhodes James.

The orphaned Stephen moves to the house of his uncle Abney.

Stephen soon discovers that the house is haunted by two ghostly children: a gypsy boy and an orphaned girl. Stephen also discovers that his uncle is obsessed with the idea of immortality.

Is there a connection between the two ghosts and uncle Abney?

The Mezzotint (1904) is a classic ghost story.

Mr. Williams is employed in a museum, and his attention is to enlarge its collection of English topographical drawings. Mr. Britnell is a publisher of art’s catalogue, he asks Mr. Williams to buy an ‘Interesting mezzotint’. Mr. Williams, although interested, wonders why the mezzotint is so expensive.

Watching the mezzotint:

‘- But there’s just one other thing.

- What?

- Why, one of the windows on the ground floor, left of the door is open.

- Is it really so? My goodness! he must have got in.’ (p.69)

Ghosts wandering between the yard and the house in a picture, jumping on a window.

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## THE ASH-TREE

‘It will be long, I think, before we arrive at a just estimate of the amount of solid reason - if there was any - which lay at the root of the universal fear of witches in old times.’ (p.85)

The Ash-Tree (1904) tells of Sir Richard Castringham who has just inherited a house, and an ash-tree.

Richard’s ancestors Sir Matthew condemned a woman to death for witchcraft. After that, the house has been cursed, but the real problem is the ash-tree.

James writes a ghost story about an ash-tree for many reasons, mainly connected with legends, superstitions, that tells of ash-trees.

Upon ash branches witches could fly; venomous animals don’t take shelter under an ash-tree; ash seedpods are used in divination; people don’t cut ash-trees for construction lumber: the houses could catch fire.

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## NUMBER 13 and COUNT MAGNUS and THE TREASURE OF ABBOT THOMAS

### NUMBER 13

‘His back was now to the door. In that moment the door opened, and an arm came out and clawed at his shoulder.’ (page 143)

Mr. Anderson, narrator's cousin, went to Denmark engaged upon some researches into the history of Danish church. He stays in an inn where the room number 13 is missing. Returning to his room, Mr. Anderson notices that the door refuses to open, he hears some noises in the room: 'He had tried the wrong door, of course. ... He glanced at the number: it was 13.' (page 120) Finally, entering in his room number 12, it 'seemed to have contracted in length ...' (page 121)

The landlord confirms to Mr. Anderson that the number 13 room had never existed, but a contract concerning these extraordinary phenomena is discovered: a professor sold himself to ...

## COUNT MAGNUS

Mr. Wraxall wants to write a book about Scandinavia. He learns about an important collection of family papers belonging to the proprietors of an ancient manor-house in Vestergothland.

The earliest owner of the manor was Magnus de la Gardie, buried in the church's mausoleum. Mr. Wraxall becomes interested in Count Magnus, especially because he had been on the Black Pilgrimage and had brought 'something or someone back with him.'

'Just at that instant ... I (Mr. Wraxall) felt a blow on my foot. Hastily enough I drew it back, and something fell on the pavement with a clash. It was the third, the last of the three padlocks which had fastened the sarcophagus (Count Magnus'). I stooped to pick it up, and - Heaven is my witness that I am writing only the bare truth - before I had raised myself there was a sound of metal hinges creaking, and I distinctly saw the lid shifting upwards. ... I was outside that dreadful building in less time than I can write.' (page 175)

## THE TREASURE OF ABBOT THOMAS

'it's perfectly safe in the daytime.' (page 243)

The story tells about a hidden treasure of Abbot Thomas. Mr. Somerton is interested in Abbot Thomas' treasure and discovers that the secret has to be found somewhere in the window. Abbot Thomas himself had placed the window illustrating Job Patriarcha, Johannes Evangelista, and Zacharias Prophetae.

Mr. Somerton deciphers the meaning of the series of letters written on the window. But there is also a warning: Gare a qui la touche.

'Then I heard him call softly: All right, sir; and went on pulling out the great bag, in complete darkness. It hung for an instant on the edge of the hole, then slipped forward on to my chest, and put his arms round my neck.' (page 264)

M.R. James' character are always quiet teachers who become actors in supernatural events. James usually doesn't tell who is the ghost, and he doesn't explain the causes of the events.

James accompanies the readers by hand towards these irrational phenomenons.

It's worth reading M.R. James for his excellent style and grammar, maybe coming from his Latin's study (he was a medieval scholar).

'I found myself at Steinfeld as soon as the resources of civilizations could put me there.' (pages 254-5)

The best story is The Treasure of Abbot Thomas, followed by Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad; The Mezzotint.

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## **Bandit says**

Every so often it's good to dip into a classic. Alas, this was the sort of classic that reminded me why it's precisely every so often and not more frequently than that. Widely beloved, widely lauded these are suppose to be among the finest tales of supernatural fiction and yet they didn't do it for me at all. I tried and tried, took several sittings. The book's page count is misleading, it's entered as 94 on GR and 122 on Amazon and yet by my account considering the time spent reading it and the fact that it comprises parts 1 & 2 of James' stories, also published as separate volumes, this should clock out at well over 200 pages. And feels much slower than that. And the thing is objectively I can tell these are suppose to be good stories, quality writing, atmospheric, imaginative...and yet at no point did I find myself engaged or even particularly interested. In fact I think the main reason I finished these is due to my completist nature and general need to try to understand why I wasn't enjoying these stories the way everyone seems to. Were they dated? Sure, but that wasn't the main detraction. I expected them to be dated. Maybe it was the somnolent pacing. Or the fact that these stories were so utterly unexciting. Either way this really didn't work for me, neither entertained as a book should nor spooked as a genre book ought to. It occurred to me that these tales might be more fun if read aloud, maybe this should have been a listen and not a read. In book form...disappointing. But try I did.

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## **Bruce Beckham says**

My (positive) review of this book has to begin with two admissions. Firstly, I have no idea how or where I came by it (hardback edition, £14.99 – quite pricey for 8 short stories) and, secondly I'm pretty certain I could not accurately have defined an 'Antiquary'.

On the latter point, *Wikipedia* tells me it's the term used for a person who studies history with particular attention to ancient artefacts, archaeological and historic sites, or historic archives and manuscripts. Having read the stories, I can confirm there is perfect congruency between this definition and the title.

As for the positive review – well, I thought they were well-constructed ghost stories, heavily laced with suspense. It's fairly obvious that something gruesome is coming to get you... and sure enough it does!

The tales were written around the end of the 19th Century, and tend to refer back to the 1700s. For me, this adds authenticity – somehow *anything* is believable if it happened before electric lighting and scientific advancement made the world a less spooky place. Ideally you'd read this book by flickering candlelight, stranded in a creaky coaching inn during a power cut, while a great thunderstorm rages through the night.

The text can be quite hard going at times. It reminded me of the style of Sir Walter Scott – long words, long sentences. Indeed – judging by the 'fog index', a measure of the ease of readability of copy (12 is an ideal score, lower is better; this review is 11) – this book comes out at closer to a whopping 30; quite something to get one's mincers around. But it does enhance the period effect, and the erudition of the narrator, the Antiquary.

The opening story features a blighted manuscript that gets passed from one unfortunate owner to the next; I couldn't help drawing the parallel with my baffling acquisition of this book. Just how *did* it get into the reading pile beside my bed? (And anyone fancy a copy?)

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## Esdaile says

Most reviewers here feel that MR James is a master of the genre and I agree. There are certain expectations of a ghost story writer and for many readers these expectations are fulfilled. As in the case of Lovecraft, the stories tend to be disarmingly similar, which is at once a weakness in terms of the religious or philosophical horizon, but has all the strength of a discipline imposed and accepted. Charcateristic of the genre is an inciteement to fear of the inheritance of the past and fear of a possible spirit world living close to us but seldom seen or apprehended. This spirit world embodies (if that is the word!) a bond with the past, our past. This is also the case with the murder mystery genre. In both the murder mystery and the ghost story, the writer works on a titilation of fear or horror, but acknowledges a clear limit to the extent of the horror. Evil remains courteous and confined and generally a stranger to us. Ghosts may droop and be gloomy and dreadful but they should not make us gloomy even if they make us fearful. These books are not intended to depress: quite the contrary. It is worth asking ourselves why not. Do ghost stories not deal with tales of fear, depression, murder and unrest? They do, but the negative or depressive aspect of any ghost story is likely to be counter-balanced, and that is certainly the case in these stories, by a nostalgic appeal. We expect our vampires to be elaborately and aristocratically dressed. We expect, or at least many of us expect, our ghost stories to be located in an old mansion or church, to be deeply rooted in events which have taken place long ago in surroundings themselves so ancient that they were silent witnesses to those past events. In short, these stories appeal to a tradition and where the reader's traditions are dead or dying, such stories can be called nostalgic and will have a nostalgic appeal. For the same reasons that tourists travel in masses to see the architecture of the past and not of today-reasons aethetic for sure but also spiritual, so people hanker after tales which remind them of a world where the past still breathed and where the dead still walked. Filled with anguish and longing together, we will that the dead walk again, that not all graves are silent. The world of these tales may have been troubled and corrupt but there was still life among the ruins. The modern world, without ghosts, is fashioned after the Death Star of "Star Wars", a world with no echoes and with no history. Our modern world is a networked vulgarity, an over-exposure, a world with its share of horror but devoid of ghosts. These ghosts stories are all history, all soul and the spirits who haunt the pages of these tales are the spirits of the past, our past, come to haunt us, whispering, "come back, come back, it is dark and old and cosy here". Today all glitters and is surface only, we fear the living not the dead and not living people so much as their creations and their demands. The surface of the past was the heavy iron lid over nightmares but also over dreams of longing, the longing for a world, not perfect, not without the eternal combat of good and evil, but a world in which neither evil nor good was ever, ever conceivably vulgar.

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