# STOP WHAT YOU'RE DOING AND READ AFTER DARK

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# Ghost Stories

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# About the Book

M. R. James wrote his ghost stories to entertain friends on Christmas Eve, and they went on to both transform and modernise a genre. James harnesses the power of suggestion to move from a recognisable world to one that is indefinably strange, and then unforgettably terrifying. Sheets, pictures, carvings, a dolls house, a lonely beach, a branch tapping on a window – ordinary things take on more than a tinge of dread in the hands of the original master of suspense.

# About the Author

Montague Rhodes James was born on 1 August 1862 near Bury St Edmunds, and he spent long periods of his later life in Suffolk, which provided the setting for many of his ghost stories. He studied at Eton and King's College, Cambridge, where he was eventually elected Fellow, and then made Provost in 1905. In 1918 he became Provost of Eton. He was a renowned medievalist and biblical scholar, and published works on palaeography, antiquarianism, bibliography and history and guides to Suffolk and Norfolk, as well as editing a collection of ghost stories by Sheridan Le Fanu. However, he remains best known for his own ghost stories, which were published in several collections, including *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1904), *A Thin Ghost and Other Stories* (1919), *A Warning to the Curious* (1925) and a collected edition in 1931. M. R. James never married and died on 12 June 1936.

M. R. JAMES

# Ghost Stories

SELECTED AND INTRODUCED BY
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# Introduction

THERE ARE SOME authors one wishes one had never read in order to have the joy of reading them for the first time. For me, M. R. James is one of these. I began reading his stories when I was about fifteen and have been rereading them ever since, for the next best thing to discovering new fiction is to be able to say of the old that we still enjoy it as much as we once did.

It was the Victorians who wrote the best ghost stories and Montague Rhodes James, born in 1862, was a Victorian, though he lived on into the 1930s. He was an eminent man and an intellectual, a Member of the Order of Merit and one-time Chancellor of the University of Cambridge. He became Provost of Eton and was a Trustee of the British Museum. Of his own stories he wrote: ‘I am told they have given pleasure of a certain sort to my readers; if so, my whole object in writing them has been attained.’

Pleasure of a certain sort, a deliciously terrifying sort, they have certainly given and will continue to give while a fascination for the supernatural in literature survives. Even now, when alone in the house at night, I would hesitate before reading of Count Magnus coming out of his tomb or of Canon Alberic and his scrapbook. A lot of lights would have to be on and I should prefer to be sitting with my back to the wall. But it is no part of my purpose here to analyse what this kind of fear is or why readers like to be frightened, only to cast an eye over some of the stories and try to find wherein James’s power lies.

What I am going to call the supernatural-horrific is a genre in fiction that has only fairly recently been revived. The works of its practitioners have very little appeal for me. Horror is piled on horror and no paranormal improbability is too extreme. All the occult is there, every excess of witchcraft, lycanthropy, vampirism, the undead, demons and demonic possession, poltergeists, visual and aural (and olfactory) manifestation, apparitions, voodoo, black magic and the powers of evil. In this kind of fiction, blood and decay spatter every chapter and the most popular profession is that of exorcist.

James was not like that. No doubt, a natural reticence restrained him. After all, he was an academic who led to some extent a cloistered life. And the age in which he lived imposed unwritten though strong moral censorship and restrictions on writing of a too explicit kind. While for some writers this was a misfortune, for James it seems to have worked to his advantage in encouraging his genius for the art of understatement.

How then does he succeed so supremely in sending shivers up his readers' spines without recourse to the horror merchants' ploys?

His stories begin quietly, often with a description of a place, a town or a country house or library, and his traveller to whom in a little while dreadful things will happen, is a scholarly person. There are – at first – no ghosts and no demons, only a gradually increasing, indefinable, slow menace. And James's characters bring trouble upon themselves by such simple innocent actions, by being a little too curious, for instance, by merely examining an old manuscript or borrowing a certain book, by picking up an apparently harmless object on the beach.

It is quiet and comfortable in the museum, the hotel bedchamber or the set of rooms in the college. Of course one is quite alone with one's incunabula, a candle burning, a pipe of tobacco, the curtains drawn against the windy

night. Possibly hung about one's neck is a crucifix inexplicably given one by a nervous serving maid. There is an inscription in some dead language to be translated, works of reference to be consulted. Still, eventually the work is done, the illuminated page turned, and one happens to look up – but what is that in the corner of the room, in the shadows where the light from the candle cannot quite reach …?

But I have mentioned understatement and given M. R. James the title of genius, an accolade which should not be lightly bestowed. It is worth examining how he uses his powers, the better to understand their effect on us. When, for instance, the scholarly travel writer Mr Wraxall begins to investigate the history of an eighteenth-century Swedish landowner who may or may not have been a necromancer, the deacon of the village church hastily brushes off his questions. So he turns to the landlord of the inn and enquires as to what was meant by the Black Pilgrimage: what was it that the Count brought back with him?

Swedes are habitually slow perhaps in answering or perhaps the landlord was an exception. I am not sure; but Mr Wraxall notes that the landlord spent at least one minute looking at him before he said anything at all. Then he came close up to his guest and with a good deal of effort he spoke:

'Mr Wraxall, I can tell you this one little tale, and no more – not any more. You must not ask anything when I have done. In my grandfather's time – that is, ninety-two years ago – there were two men who said: "The Count is dead; we do not care for him. We will go tonight and have a free hunt in his wood." The long wood on the hill that you have seen behind Råback. Well, those that heard him say this, they said, "No, do not go: we are sure you will meet with persons walking who should not be walking. They should be resting, not walking …"'

This is understatement, but it is more than that. James has a curious technique of withholding information in a way that allows a very free play to the reader's imagination as well as creating a peculiarly uneasy kind of suspense. See how his narrator introduces us to the little German town where Abbot Thomas hid his treasure:

'It has not seemed to me worth while to lavish money on a visit to the place, for though it is probably more attractive than either Mr Somerton or Mr Gregory thought it, there is evidently little, if anything, of first-rate interest to be seen – except, perhaps, one thing which I should not care to see.'

He almost throws it away. With an air of averting the mind from unpleasant matters, he casts it aside. Though an attractive place, these men did not find it so. Immediately the reader asks why not. And before he can provide his own answer is told there was one thing in Steinfeld of first-rate interest to be seen, an object maybe or place or monument, the very thought of which was enough to strike terror into the heart of this placid, reasonable, down-to-earth narrator.

It is contrast too that M. R. James employs. His protagonist is a don, a librarian, an antiquary or curator of a museum, for James always had the good sense to write about the people and the fields of study he knew well. There is an inevitable dry-as-dustness about them which shows up horrendous discoveries or experiences as a bright splash of blood might show the more hideously on a sheet of shrivelled parchment. Celibates his people are too, immersed in researching or collecting or annotating, living in a man's world where tobacco is smoked, whist and golf are played and Latin is a lingua franca. There is no sex and very little romance, unless we count the rather contrived marriage that comes about between Mr Garrett and Miss Simpson as the result of some very unpleasant happenings in a library. For M. R. James's ghost stories are singularly deficient in women. There are a few peripheral wives, a maid-servant or two, here and there a landlady and one

very frightened, though handsome, girl, the daughter of a sacristan.

So it can be said that these stories do not in any way rely on relations between the sexes for their power to entertain and enthral. I could go further and say they do not depend on the differentiation of characters either. There is not much to choose between Professor Parkins who has such an appalling adventure with bedclothes and poor Mr Dunning who, having had the runes cast on him, felt something ill-defined and impalpable step between him and his fellow men. Or between either of them and Mr Anderson who notices that there are too many (or too few) rooms in his Jutland hotel. Surely they are all M. R. James himself, and none the worse for that. It is not man's predicament in society we are examining here or an accurate sensitivity to time and place, but rather seeking to be frightened in perhaps the best way any writer has succeeded in frightening his readers.

The collection called *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* is generally thought to contain the best of M. R. James. Six of those I have chosen to be included here come from there. But I have also picked *The Stalls of Barchester Cathedral* because it is a cat story and any collection of tales of the supernatural should include one with a cat or cats in it, these clever creatures inevitably having about them something secretive and mysterious. And my own favourite of all, *Casting the Runes*. This latter is not the best of M. R. James – pride of place must go to *Count Magnus* or *The Treasure of Abbot Thomas* – but it is perhaps the most chilling, containing as it does one of the most truly dreadful experiences of an occult nature I have ever read. And so quietly and casually related, this horror, tossed in lightly almost as an aside, this ultimate in the terrifying, told with a matter-of-factness that makes us feel something of a similar nature might easily happen to any of us on a

solitary midnight. I shall leave it to the readers of this book to guess the incident I mean.

One of the most famous stories is *Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad*, distinguished, I think, for the originality of the concept. James was an amateur archaeologist and he put his interest in digging up the past to good use in his literature. So also did he use his knowledge of the classics, and the reader must not be put off by the fact that the whole opening paragraph of *Abbot Thomas* is in Latin. Patience will be rewarded. *Number 13* is one of those disappearing room stories, having a lot in common with the better-known *So Long at the Fair*, which is about the efforts of an hotel management to keep from its clients and visitors to the Great Exhibition that an epidemic has come to Paris. James's story is far more frightening. It is a ghost story and a detective story at the same time – an uneasy, uncomfortable sort of tale that would not only make a prospective hotel guest shun room 13 but rooms 12 and 14 as well.

This kind of effect is common to these stories. Who, after reading *The Mezzotint*, can look at a lithograph or print of a country house with quite the same eyes as before? It does not fall to many of us to go clambering down wells after dark on a treasure hunt. But I would defy anyone, after *Abbot Thomas* has been read and inwardly digested, to reach up blindly or in darkness to retrieve something from a shelf without the fear – absurd, childish, hysterical even? – of the object putting out its arms to clasp him round the neck …

*Canon Alberic's Scrapbook* also contains a vividly horrifying and most memorable incident. It is no exaggeration to say that it has made me rather unwilling to look at the kind of pictures with which nineteenth-century bibles used to be illustrated or at certain steel engravings of classical scenes. I cannot see a signpost pointing to Belchamp St Paul (something I often do see, living where I

do) without recalling poor Mr Wraxall's journey across Essex and the two motionless figures he saw at the crossroads. After learning what happened to Mr Humphreys I am not at all sure I would go alone into a maze – I certainly never have done.

It is another world that James introduces us to, and I do not simply mean a region of the supernatural. *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* was published in 1904 and Mr Wraxall flees from Harwich and his abominable pursuers in a 'closed fly'. Mr Somerton – it is all strictly surnames and styles here – travels about Germany accompanied by his manservant. James's Burnstow, where unspeakable things come out of digs, is on his own admission Felixstowe, and how unspoilt and deserted does the Suffolk coast seem! The continent of Europe is tourist-free apart from the occasional, and in the circumstances somewhat misguided, seekers after hidden manuscripts, reputed treasure and hitherto indecipherable inscriptions. But all this is only what we might expect in Victorian and early twentieth century fiction. Other features of M. R. James's work are less obvious but highly significant.

Fiction concerning the supernatural falls into two categories. There is the first kind, in which the works of Ann Radcliffe, that mistress of the Gothic novel, naturally find a place. Here everything which happens is capable of a rational explanation. In more recent times apparently paranormal events in fiction are usually attributed to hallucination on the part of the witness, to dreams or even schizophrenia. Then there is the second category where it is accepted that the supernatural does exist, that there are indeed more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in any rationalist philosophy, and it is here that the stories of Dr James belong.

Humanity seems to need its questions to be answered, ends to be tied and reassurance offered, so works of the first kind should in theory be more satisfying to read. But in

fact they are not. Instead of relief when all is explained, the reader feels let down – ‘Is that all it was?’ he asks. Daylight has been let in upon magic and shown the ghost to be a practical joker in a white sheet. In the stories of M. R. James no such explanations are offered. And in some contradictory fashion the reader is the more satisfied, the more aghast and disbelief the more securely suspended.

Or, rather, disbelief has never put in an appearance. It has never sidled into that shadowy corner and waited for the author to suspend it. The world of James may be a lost one and his characters distant from us both in time and manner of life but from the first line, as it might be, ‘St Bertrand de Comminges is a decayed town on the spurs of the Pyrenees,’ we believe utterly. We are in as much a state of absolute credence as we might have been when beginning on one of Dr James’s non-fictional historical works. And this is partly because of his style, both scholarly and assured. This is in spite of his own declaration: ‘As for the fragments of ostensible erudition which are scattered about my pages, hardly anything in them is not pure invention.’ It is nevertheless as if we are saying to ourselves: anyone who knows so much about Tractate Middoths and Premonstratensian abbeys and palaeography and can write Latin with such ease – why, when such a man tells us a dead count can make the padlocks fall off his sarcophagus and come out of the tomb and a demon materialize because a traveller examines a certain book, these things must also come within the scope of his knowledge.

I think it is here, as much as in his understanding of the value of reticence, that James excels. It is inconceivable that this learned antiquarian should exceed the bounds of strict truth. He would not lead us up the garden – or down the well. These things must have happened; we believe and believing, put the lights on and our backs to the wall.

‘There is no receipt for success,’ he wrote in the preface to the 1931 edition of his collected short stories, ‘in this form of fiction more than in any other. The public, as Dr Johnson said, are the ultimate judges: if they are pleased it is well; if not, it is no use to tell them why they ought to have been pleased.’

So let these ultimate judges read. When it is M. R. James we are talking about, let them experience what is a synonym for pleasure – a hair-raising apprehension. Most will surely agree with me that he found his ‘receipt’ for success and many a variation on the theme.

# Canon Alberic’s Scrap-book

ST BERTRAND DE COMMINGES is a decayed town on the spurs of the Pyrenees, not very far from Toulouse, and still nearer to Bagnères-de-Luchon. It was the site of a bishopric until the Revolution, and has a cathedral which is visited by a certain number of tourists. In the spring of 1883 an Englishman arrived at this old-world place – I can hardly dignify it with the name of city, for there are not a thousand inhabitants. He was a Cambridge man, who had come specially from Toulouse to see St Bertrand’s Church, and had left two friends, who were less keen archaeologists than himself, in their hotel at Toulouse, under promise to join him on the following morning. Half an hour at the church would satisfy *them*, and all three could then pursue their journey in the direction of Auch. But our Englishman had come early on the day in question, and proposed to himself to fill a notebook and to use several dozens of plates in the process of describing and photographing every corner of the wonderful church that dominates the little hill of Comminges. In order to carry out this design satisfactorily, it was necessary to monopolize the verger of the church for the day. The verger or sacristan (I prefer the latter appellation, inaccurate as it may be) was accordingly sent for by the somewhat brusque lady who keeps the inn of the Chapeau Rouge; and when he came, the Englishman found him an unexpectedly interesting object of study. It was not in the personal appearance of the little, dry, wizened old man that the interest lay, for he was precisely like dozens of other church-guardians in France, but in a

curious furtive, or rather hunted and oppressed, air which he had. He was perpetually half glancing behind him; the muscles of his back and shoulders seemed to be hunched in a continual nervous contraction, as if he were expecting every moment to find himself in the clutch of an enemy. The Englishman hardly knew whether to put him down as a man haunted by a fixed delusion, or as one oppressed by a guilty conscience, or as an unbearably henpecked husband. The probabilities, when reckoned up, certainly pointed to the last idea; but, still, the impression conveyed was that of a more formidable persecutor even than a termagant wife.

However, the Englishman (let us call him Dennistoun) was soon too deep in his notebook and too busy with his camera to give more than an occasional glance to the sacristan. Whenever he did look at him, he found him at no great distance, either huddling himself back against the wall or crouching in one of the gorgeous stalls. Dennistoun became rather fidgety after a time. Mingled suspicions that he was keeping the old man from his *déjeuner*, that he was regarded as likely to make away with St Bertrand's ivory crozier, or with the dusty stuffed crocodile that hangs over the font, began to torment him.

'Won't you go home?' he said at last; 'I'm quite well able to finish my notes alone; you can lock me in if you like. I shall want at least two hours more here, and it must be cold for you, isn't it?'

'Good Heavens!' said the little man, whom the suggestion seemed to throw into a state of unaccountable terror, 'such a thing cannot be thought of for a moment. Leave monsieur alone in the church? No, no; two hours, three hours, all will be the same to me. I have breakfasted, I am not at all cold, with many thanks to monsieur.'

'Very well, my little man,' quoth Dennistoun to himself: 'you have been warned, and you must take the consequences.'

Before the expiration of the two hours, the stalls, the enormous dilapidated organ, the choir-screen of Bishop John de Mauléon, the remnants of glass and tapestry, and the objects in the treasure-chamber, had been well and truly examined; the sacristan still keeping at Dennistoun's heels, and every now and then whipping round as if he had been stung, when one or other of the strange noises that trouble a large empty building fell on his ear. Curious noises they were sometimes.

'Once,' Dennistoun said to me, 'I could have sworn I heard a thin metallic voice laughing high up in the tower. I darted an inquiring glance at my sacristan. He was white to the lips. "It is he – that is – it is no one; the door is locked," was all he said, and we looked at each other for a full minute.'

Another little incident puzzled Dennistoun a good deal. He was examining a large dark picture that hangs behind the altar, one of a series illustrating the miracles of St Bertrand. The composition of the picture is well-nigh indecipherable, but there is a Latin legend below, which runs thus:

> Qualiter S. Bertrandus liberavit hominem quern diabolus diu volebat strangulare. [How St Bertrand delivered a man whom the Devil long sought to strangle.]

Dennistoun was turning to the sacristan with a smile and a jocular remark of some sort on his lips, but he was confounded to see the old man on his knees, gazing at the picture with the eye of a suppliant in agony, his hands tightly clasped, and a rain of tears on his cheeks. Dennistoun naturally pretended to have noticed nothing, but the question would not away from him, 'Why should a daub of this kind affect anyone so strongly?' He seemed to himself to be getting some sort of clue to the reason of the

strange look that had been puzzling him all the day: the man must be a monomaniac; but what was his monomania?

It was nearly five o'clock; the short day was drawing in, and the church began to fill with shadows, while the curious noises – the muffled footfalls and distant talking voices that had been perceptible all day – seemed, no doubt because of the fading light and the consequently quickened sense of hearing, to become more frequent and insistent.

The sacristan began for the first time to show signs of hurry and impatience. He heaved a sigh of relief when camera and notebook were finally packed up and stowed away, and hurriedly beckoned Dennistoun to the western door of the church, under the tower. It was time to ring the Angelus. A few pulls at the reluctant rope, and the great bell Bertrande, high in the tower, began to speak, and swung her voice up among the pines and down to the valleys, loud with mountain-streams, calling the dwellers on those lonely hills to remember and repeat the salutation of the angel to her whom he called Blessed among women. With that a profound quiet seemed to fall for the first time that day upon the little town, and Dennistoun and the sacristan went out of the church.

On the doorstep they fell into conversation.

'Monsieur seemed to interest himself in the old choir-books in the sacristy.'

'Undoubtedly. I was going to ask you if there were a library in the town.'

'No, monsieur; perhaps there used to be one belonging to the Chapter, but it is now such a small place –' Here came a strange pause of irresolution, as it seemed; then, with a sort of plunge, he went on: 'But if monsieur is *amateur des vieux livres*, I have at home something that might interest him. It is not a hundred yards.'

At once all Dennistoun's cherished dreams of finding priceless manuscripts in untrodden corners of France flashed up, to die down again the next moment. It was

probably a stupid missal of Plantin's printing, about 1580. Where was the likelihood that a place so near Toulouse would not have been ransacked long ago by collectors? However, it would be foolish not to go; he would reproach himself for ever after if he refused. So they set off. On the way the curious irresolution and sudden determination of the sacristan recurred to Dennistoun, and he wondered in a shamefaced way whether he was being decoyed into some purlieu to be made away with as a supposed rich Englishman. He contrived, therefore, to begin talking with his guide, and to drag in, in a rather clumsy fashion, the fact that he expected two friends to join him early the next morning. To his surprise, the announcement seemed to relieve the sacristan at once of some of the anxiety that oppressed him.

'That is well,' he said quite brightly – 'that is very well. Monsieur will travel in company with his friends; they will be always near him. It is a good thing to travel thus in company – sometimes.'

The last word appeared to be added as an afterthought, and to bring with it a relapse into gloom for the poor little man.

They were soon at the house, which was one rather larger than its neighbours, stone-built, with a shield carved over the door, the shield of Alberic de Mauléon, a collateral descendant, Dennistoun tells me, of Bishop John de Mauléon. This Alberic was a Canon of Comminges from 1680 to 1701. The upper windows of the mansion were boarded up, and the whole place bore, as does the rest of Comminges, the aspect of decaying age.

Arrived on his doorstep, the sacristan paused a moment.

'Perhaps,' he said, 'perhaps, after all, monsieur has not the time?'

'Not at all – lots of time – nothing to do till tomorrow. Let us see what it is you have got.'

The door was opened at this point, and a face looked out, a face far younger than the sacristan's, but bearing something of the same distressing look: only here it seemed to be the mark, not so much of fear for personal safety as of acute anxiety on behalf of another. Plainly, the owner of the face was the sacristan's daughter; and, but for the expression I have described, she was a handsome girl enough. She brightened up considerably seeing her father accompanied by an able-bodied stranger. A few remarks passed between father and daughter, of which Dennistoun only caught these words, said by the sacristan, 'He was laughing in the church,' words which were answered only by a look of terror from the girl.

But in another minute 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 hearth. Something of the character of an oratory was imparted to it by a tall crucifix, which reached almost to the ceiling on one side; the figure was painted of the natural colours, the cross was black. Under this stood a chest of some age and solidity, and when a lamp had been brought, and chairs set, the sacristan went to this chest, and produced therefrom, with growing excitement and nervousness, as Dennistoun thought, a large book, wrapped in a white cloth, on which cloth a cross was rudely embroidered in red thread. Even before the wrapping had been removed, Dennistoun began to be interested by the size and shape of the volume. 'Too large for a missal,' he thought, 'and not the shape of an antiphoner; perhaps it may be something good, after all.' The next moment the book was open, and Dennistoun felt that he had at last lit upon something better than good. Before him lay a large folio, bound, perhaps, late in the seventeenth century, with the arms of Canon Alberic de Mauléon stamped in gold on the sides. There may have been a hundred and fifty leaves of paper in the book, and on almost every one of them was

fastened a leaf from an illuminated manuscript. Such a collection Dennistoun had hardly dreamed of in his wildest moments. Here were ten leaves from a copy of Genesis, illustrated with pictures, which could not be later than AD 700. Further on was a complete set of pictures from a Psalter, of English execution, of the very finest kind that the thirteenth century could produce; and, perhaps best of all, there were twenty leaves of uncial writing in Latin, which, as a few words seen here and there told him at once, must belong to some very early unknown patristic treatise. Could it possibly be a fragment of the copy of Papias 'On the Words of Our Lord', which was known to have existed as late as the twelfth century at Nimes?[1] In any case, his mind was made up; that book must return to Cambridge with him, even if he had to draw the whole of his balance from the bank and stay at St Bertrand till the money came. He glanced up at the sacristan to see if his face yielded any hint that the book was for sale. The sacristan was pale, and his lips were working.

'If monsieur will turn on to the end,' he said.

So monsieur turned on, meeting new treasures at every rise of a leaf; and at the end of the book he came upon two sheets of paper, of much more recent date than anything he had yet seen, which puzzled him considerably. They must be contemporary, he decided, with the unprincipled Canon Alberic, who had doubtless plundered the Chapter library of St Bertrand to form this priceless scrap-book. On the first of the paper sheets was a plan, carefully drawn and instantly recognizable by a person who knew the ground, of the south aisle and cloisters of St Bertrand's. There were curious signs looking like planetary symbols, and a few Hebrew words, in the corners; and in the north-west angle of the cloister was a cross drawn in gold paint. Below the plan were some lines of writing in Latin, which ran thus:

> Responsa 12mi Dec. 1694. Interrogatum est: Inveniamne? Responsum est: Invenies. Fiamne dives? Fies. Vivamne invidendus? Vives. Moriarne in lecto meo? Ita. [Answers of the 12th of December, 1694. It was asked: Shall I find it? Answer: Thou shalt. Shall I become rich? Thou wilt. Shall I live an object of envy? Thou wilt. Shall I die in my bed? Thou wilt.]

'A good specimen of the treasure-hunter's record – quite reminds one of Mr Minor-Canon Quatremain in *Old St Paul's*,' was Dennistoun's comment, and he turned the leaf.

What he then saw impressed him, as he has often told me, more than he could have conceived any drawing or picture capable of impressing him. And, though the drawing he saw is no longer in existence, there is a photograph of it (which I possess) which fully bears out that statement. The picture in question was a sepia drawing at the end of the seventeenth century, representing, one would say at first sight, a Biblical scene; for the architecture (the picture represented an interior) and the figures had that semi-classical flavour about them which the artists of two hundred years ago thought appropriate to illustrations of the Bible. On the right was a King on his throne, the throne elevated on twelve steps, a canopy overhead, lions on either side – evidently King Solomon. He was bending forward with outstretched sceptre, in attitude of command; his face expressed horror and disgust, yet there was in it also the mark of imperious will and confident power. The left half of the picture was the strangest, however. The interest plainly centred there. On the pavement before the throne were grouped four soldiers, surrounding a crouching figure which must be described in a moment. A fifth soldier lay dead on the pavement, his neck distorted, and his eyeballs starting from his head. The four surrounding guards were looking at the King. In their faces the sentiment of horror was intensified;

they seemed, in fact, only restrained from flight by their implicit trust in their master. All this terror was plainly excited by the being that crouched in their midst. I entirely despair of conveying by any words the impression which this figure makes upon anyone who looks at it. I recollect once showing the photograph of the drawing to a lecturer on morphology – a person of, I was going to say, abnormally sane and unimaginative habits of mind. He absolutely refused to be alone for the rest of that evening, and he told me afterwards that for many nights he had not dared to put out his light before going to sleep. However, the main traits of the figure I can at least indicate. At first you saw only a mass of coarse, matted black hair; presently it was seen that this covered a body of fearful thinness, almost a skeleton, but with the muscles standing out like wires. The hands were of a dusky pallor, covered, like the body, with long, coarse hairs, and hideously taloned. The eyes, touched in with a burning yellow, had intensely black pupils, and were fixed upon the throned King with a look of beast-like hate. Imagine one of the awful bird-catching spiders of South America translated into human form, and endowed with intelligence just less than human, and you will have some faint conception of the terror inspired by this appalling effigy. One remark is universally made by those to whom I have shown the picture: ‘It was drawn from the life.’

As soon as the first shock of his irresistible fright had subsided, Dennistoun stole a look at his hosts. The sacristan’s hands were pressed upon his eyes; his daughter, looking up at the cross on the wall, was telling her beads feverishly.

At last the question was asked, ‘Is this book for sale?’

There was the same hesitation, the same plunge of determination that he had noticed before, and then came the welcome answer, ‘If monsieur pleases.’

‘How much do you ask for it?’

‘I will take two hundred and fifty francs.’

This was confounding. Even a collector’s conscience is sometimes stirred, and Dennistoun’s conscience was tenderer than a collector’s.

‘My good man!’ he said again and again, ‘your book is worth far more than two hundred and fifty francs, I assure you – far more.’

But the answer did not vary: ‘I will take two hundred and fifty francs, not more.’

There was really no possibility of refusing such a chance. The money was paid, the receipt signed, a glass of wine drunk over the transaction, and then the sacristan seemed to become a new man. He stood upright, he ceased to throw those suspicious glances behind him, he actually laughed or tried to laugh. Dennistoun rose to go.

‘I shall have the honour of accompanying monsieur to his hotel?’ said the sacristan.

‘Oh no, thanks! it isn’t a hundred yards. I know the way perfectly, and there is a moon.’

The offer was pressed three or four times, and refused as often.

‘Then, monsieur will summon me if – if he finds occasion; he will keep the middle of the road, the sides are so rough.’

‘Certainly, certainly,’ said Dennistoun, who was impatient to examine his prize by himself; and he stepped out into the passage with his book under his arm.

Here he was met by the daughter; she, it appeared, was anxious to do a little business on her own account; perhaps, like Gehazi, to ‘take somewhat’ from the foreigner whom her father had spared.

‘A silver crucifix and chain for the neck; monsieur would perhaps be good enough to accept it?’

Well, really, Dennistoun hadn’t much use for these things. What did mademoiselle want for it?

‘Nothing – nothing in the world. Monsieur is more than welcome to it.’

The tone in which this and much more was said was unmistakably genuine, so that Dennistoun was reduced to profuse thanks, and submitted to have the chain put round his neck. It really seemed as if he had rendered the father and daughter some service which they hardly knew how to repay. As he set off with his book they stood at the door looking after him, and they were still looking when he waved them a last good night from the steps of the Chapeau Rouge.

Dinner was over, and Dennistoun was in his bedroom, shut up alone with his acquisition. The landlady had manifested a particular interest in him since he had told her that he had paid a visit to the sacristan and bought an old book from him. He thought, too, that he had heard a hurried dialogue between her and the said sacristan in the passage outside the *salle à manger*; some words to the effect that ‘Pierre and Bertrand would be sleeping in the house’ had closed the conversation.

All this time a growing feeling of discomfort had been creeping over him – nervous reaction, perhaps, after the delight of his discovery. Whatever it was, it resulted in a conviction that there was someone behind him, and that he was far more comfortable with his back to the wall. All this, of course, weighed light in the balance as against the obvious value of the collection he had acquired. And now, as I said, he was alone in his bedroom, taking stock of Canon Alberic’s treasures, in which every moment revealed something more charming.

‘Bless Canon Alberic!’ said Dennistoun, who had an inveterate habit of talking to himself. ‘I wonder where he is now? Dear me! I wish that landlady would learn to laugh in a more cheering manner; it makes one feel as if there was someone dead in the house. Half a pipe more, did you say? I think perhaps you are right. I wonder what that crucifix is

that the young woman insisted on giving me? Last century, I suppose. Yes, probably. It is rather a nuisance of a thing to have round one's neck – just too heavy. Most likely her father had been wearing it for years. I think I might give it a clean up before I put it away.'

He had taken the crucifix off, and laid it on the table, when his attention was caught by an object lying on the red cloth just by his left elbow. Two or three ideas of what it might be flitted through his brain with their own incalculable quickness.

'A penwiper? No, no such thing in the house. A rat? No, too black. A large spider? I trust to godness not – no. Good God! a hand like the hand in that picture!'

In another infinitesimal flash he had taken it in. Pale, dusky skin, covering nothing but bones and tendons of appalling strength; coarse black hairs, longer than ever grew on a human hand; nails rising from the ends of the fingers and curving sharply down and forward, grey, horny and wrinkled.

He flew out of his chair with deadly, inconceivable terror clutching at his heart. The shape, whose left hand rested on the table, was rising to a standing posture behind his seat, its right hand crooked above his scalp. There was black and tattered drapery about it; the coarse hair covered it as in the drawing. The lower jaw was thin – what can I call it? – shallow, like a beast's; teeth showed behind the black lips; there was no nose; the eyes, of a fiery yellow, against which the pupils showed black and intense, and the exulting hate and thirst to destroy life which shone there, were the most horrifying features in the whole vision. There was intelligence of a kind in them – intelligence beyond that of a beast, below that of a man.

The feelings which this horror stirred in Dennistoun were the intensest physical fear and the most profound mental loathing. What did he do? What could he do? He has never been quite certain what words he said, but he knows

that he spoke, that he grasped blindly at the silver crucifix, that he was conscious of a movement towards him on the part of the demon, and that he screamed with the voice of an animal in hideous pain.

Pierre and Bertrand, the two sturdy little serving-men, who rushed in, saw nothing, but felt themselves thrust aside by something that passed out between them, and found Dennistoun in a swoon. They sat up with him that night, and his two friends were at St Bertrand by nine o'clock next morning. He himself, though still shaken and nervous, was almost himself by that time, and his story found credence with them, though not until they had seen the drawing and talked with the sacristan.

Almost at dawn the little man had come to the inn on some pretence, and had listened with the deepest interest to the story retailed by the landlady. He showed no surprise.

'It is he – it is he! I have seen him myself,' was his only comment; and to all questionings but one reply was vouchsafed: '*Deux fois je l'ai vu; mille fois je l'ai senti*.' He would tell them nothing of the provenance of the book, nor any details of his experiences. 'I shall soon sleep, and my rest will be sweet. Why should you trouble me?' he said.[2]

We shall never know what he or Canon Alberic de Mauléon suffered. At the back of that fateful drawing were some lines of writing which may be supposed to throw light on the situation:

Contradictio Salomonis cum demonio nocturno.
Albericus de Mauleone delineavit.
V. Deus in adiutorium. Ps. Qui habitat.
Sancte Bertrande, demoniorum effugator, intercede pro me miserrimo.
Primum uidi nocte 12$^{mi}$ Dec. 1694: uidebo mox ultimum.
Peccaui et passus sum, plura adhuc passurus. Dec. 29, 1701.[3]

I have never quite understood what was Dennistoun's view of the events I have narrated. He quoted to me once a text from Ecclesiasticus: 'Some spirits there be that are created for vengeance, and in their fury lay on sore strokes.' On another occasion he said: 'Isaiah was a very sensible man; doesn't he say something about night monsters living in the ruins of Babylon? These things are rather beyond us at present.'

Another confidence of his impressed me rather, and I sympathised with it. We had been, last year, to Comminges, to see Canon Alberic's tomb. It is a great marble erection with an effigy of the Canon in a large wig and soutane, and an elaborate eulogy of his learning below. I saw Dennistoun talking for some time with the Vicar of St Bertrand's, and as we drove away he said to me: 'I hope it isn't wrong: you know I am a Presbyterian – but I – I believe there will be "saying of Mass and singing of dirges" for Alberic de Mauléon's rest.' Then he added, with a touch of the Northern British in his tone, 'I had no notion they came so dear.'

The book is in the Wentworth Collection at Cambridge. The drawing was photographed and then burnt by Dennistoun on the day when he left Comminges on the occasion of his first visit.

[1] We now know that these leaves did contain a considerable fragment of that work, if not of that actual copy of it.

[2] He died that summer; his daughter married, and settled at St Papoul. She never understood the circumstances of her father's 'obsession'.

[3] i.e., The Dispute of Solomon with a demon of the night. Drawn by Alberic de Mauléon. *Versicle*. O Lord, make haste to help me. *Psalm*. Whoso dwelleth (xci).

Saint Bertrand, who puttest devils to flight, pray for me most unhappy. I saw it first on the night of Dec. 12, 1694: soon I shall see it for the last time. I have sinned and suffered, and have more to suffer yet. Dec. 29, 1701.

The 'Gallia Christiana' gives the date of the Canon's death as December 31, 1701, 'in bed, of a sudden seizure'. Details of this kind are not common in the great work of the Sammarthani.