

## DISC ONE

### TRACK ONE. A LIVERMERE POEM

James wrote this poem in a letter to his sister Grace, on 17 January, 1888. At the time he was in Cyprus on an archaeological dig, but its setting is clearly Livermere, the Suffolk village where his father was rector and where he spent most of his childhood. Livermere is also the setting for his last piece of supernatural writing - *A Vignette* - published posthumously in November 1936. First published in Michael Cox, *M R James: An Informal Portrait*, 1983.

### TRACK TWO. A NIGHT IN KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL

Unpublished in his lifetime, this is James's earliest surviving supernatural tale. It probably dates from 1892: in May of that year James, like the narrator of the story, wrote an article on the glass of King's College Chapel for the *Cambridge Review*. First published in *Ghosts and Scholars*, no. 7, 1985.

### TRACK THREE. A SCHOOL STORY

This tale written as a Christmas entertainment for the pupils of the King's College Choir School, probably in 1906, the year after James became Provost of the College. The school described here is based on his own prep school, Temple Grove, in south west London. First published in *More Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, 1911.

### TRACK FOUR. AFTER DARK IN THE PLAYING FIELDS

References to Sheep's Bridge, Bad Calx Tree, the Fourth of June Fireworks, etc, make it clear that the playing fields of the title are those of Eton College, where James became Provost in 1918. First published in *College Days*, an Eton ephemeral, on June 28, 1924.

## << DISC TWO

### TRACK ONE. STORIES I HAVE TRIED TO WRITE

The notes and early drafts of several of the ideas mentioned here exist among James's papers and have been published in various editions of *Ghosts and Scholars*. His experience with the toad occurred in early November 1929 and is recounted more fully in a letter to his friend Gwendolyn McBryde. First published in *The Touchstone*, November 30, 1929.

### TRACK TWO. THERE WAS A MAN DWELT BY A CHURCHYARD

The title and the characters of Mamillius and Queen Hermione come from Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale*, Act 2, Scene 5, ll.25ff: "A sad tale's best for winter; I have one of sprites and goblins... There was a man... Dwelt by a churchyard..." First published in the Eton ephemeral *Snapdragon*, December 6, 1924.

### TRACK THREE. RATS

The quotation at the beginning comes from Charles Dickens's 1861 Christmas ghost story, *Tom Tiddler's Ground*. First published in *At Random*, an Eton ephemeral, March 23, 1929.

### TRACK FOUR. THE MALICE OF INANIMATE OBJECTS

The friend referred to in the opening lines is probably J W Clark, a well known Cambridge personality in James's day, who is known to have used the phrase which gives the piece its title. First published in *The Masquerade*, an Eton College ephemeral, in June 1933.

### TRACK FIVE. A VIGNETTE

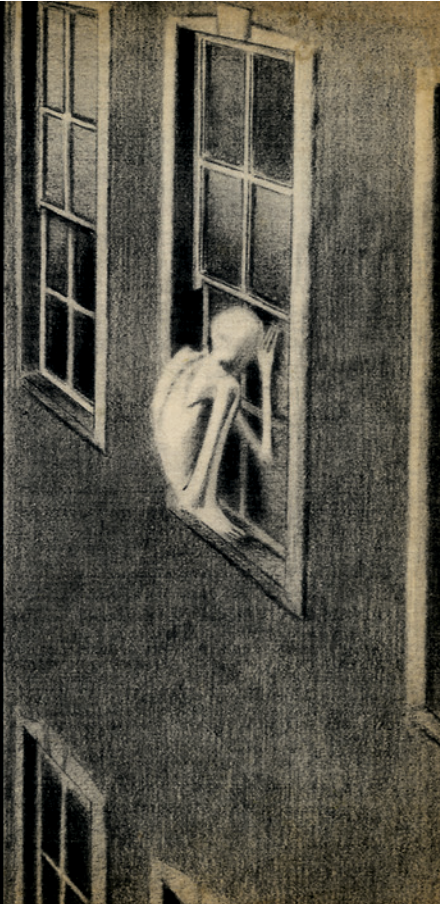
Six months before his death on June 12, 1936, M R James responded to a request by the editor of the *London Mercury* for a new ghost story, with this piece, which brings us back to the Livermere of his childhood. Published in *The London Mercury*, November 1936.

NUNKIE AUDIO PRESENTS

# CURIOUS CREATURES

THE SHORTER HORROR  
OF M R JAMES

READ BY  
R M LLOYD PARRY



## CURIOUS CREATURES: THE SHORTER HORROR OF M R JAMES

All of M R James's horror is short, of course. Concision is one of his great virtues as a storyteller. True, he is an expert parodist of overblown speech and writing, and often seeks to raise a chuckle with an elegant circumlocution. And some may feel, as I do, that the stock figure of the garrulous plebeian makes several appearances too many, particularly in the later tales. But words are never wasted in the antiquary's ghost stories. Detail is never included simply for detail's sake. Indeed many of his most chilling effects are achieved by deliberately not saying enough.

This concision might have something to do with the circumstances for which the earliest stories were written: to be read aloud to friends in King's College, Cambridge, usually on Christmas Eve. James had an audience, a highly educated, intellectually fastidious audience, and he had to keep it entertained. After a fine dinner in Hall, the claret jug still circulating, with only the flame of a single candle to light the room, the author knew only too well how difficult it was to hold the attention. As he admits in his memoir, Eton and King's, he was, on these occasions, "*not always able to ward off sleep from some listener's eye... this rankles a little still...*"

I know how he feels. I have committed six of his finest tales to memory, and since 2006 have toured the UK, USA and Ireland performing lightly adapted versions of them. I perform where possible by candlelight and try to evoke something of the conditions in which the stories were first performed (for I feel very much that James performed them rather than simply read them.) And, yes, it rankles no less today when people choose to shelter from James's horrors beneath the veil of sleep.

But most people do manage to stay awake, and I have found that the stories still work exceptionally well spoken out loud and experienced live. They're still capable of producing genuine shudders and authentic laughter in an attentive modern audience, and two performed on either side of an interval make for a satisfying night at the theatre.

But there are some pieces which, though entertaining, are too short, and in some cases too slight, to work successfully on stage, and I've gathered my favourite of these together here. They include the earliest and the last tales that James is known to have written, and taken as a whole they contain all the elements that make him pre-eminent among supernatural storytellers: the strange and macabre events, the vividly evoked locations, the school-boyish humour and donish wit, all underscored by the dreadful realisation that everything is not as it should be.

### *Are there here and there sequestered places which some curious creatures still frequent...?*

Though written over a period more than 40 years the narrator's voice is consistent throughout these shorter works, and it's recognizably the same voice that told the longer, more famous tales. It was a voice that enjoyed scaring and amusing people, that was proud to display its erudition, that "*rarely laughed but often chuckled.*" But it's a voice too that has cadences of melancholy in it and, occasionally, what sounds like genuine fear. Take this, the intriguing final paragraph of A Vignette, the last ghost story M R James ever wrote, from which the title to this collection comes,

*... every now and again the query haunts me: Are there here and there sequestered places which some curious creatures still frequent, whom once on a time anybody could see and speak to as they went about on their daily occasions, whereas now only at rare intervals, in a series of years, does one cross their paths and become aware of them; and perhaps that is just as well for the peace of mind of simple people.*

As with my live shows I have lightly adapted the texts here. In some cases this is to make James's meaning clearer to the listener; in others to make it easier for me to read the stories out loud. All the unadulterated texts are readily accessible online or in anthologies.

– Robert Lloyd Parry

## CREDITS

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All music was recorded on the gramophone at Hemingford Grey Manor, Cambridgeshire by Mark Wingfield. Many thanks to Diana Boston.

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