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Collected Ghost Stories

with an Introduction by David Stuart Davies

Written by M.R. James

Published by Wordsworth Editions

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COLLECTED GHOST STORIES

M. R. James

with an Introduction by
DAVID STUART DAVIES



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INTRODUCTION

Montague Rhodes James died in 1936 and yet today he still remains the master ghost-story writer. During the intervening years his spine-chilling narratives have never been out of print and his reputation and influence remain intact. All authors who write fiction that is created to chill and provide a sense of unease not only owe a debt of gratitude but cannot fail to have been touched and inspired by the genius of M. R. James. Why is this? What makes his tales so special? Paradoxically, the answer is a simple one, but it is also subtle and surprisingly clever. James was well aware that the greatest horrors lie within the human imagination and one only needs to stimulate that imagination for it to conjure up the most frightening apparitions which words alone cannot create. That is why his stories have remained so potent and affect modern readers in the same way as they chilled those who first read them.

It is not James's style to write long, gory, gruesome descriptive passages in order to achieve his aim of frightening the reader. Instead, he merely suggests the horror by a surprising and unnerving phrase, mentioning an unexpected or incongruous shadow or an eerie sound, and then the reader's imagination takes over, feeding on these hints in order to conjure up the full disturbing picture for himself. And our own individual constructions, personal to us, will be far more frightening than anything that an author can create. When we start to read a James story we enter into a pact with him, agreeing that, prompted and stimulated by him, we will furnish the nightmarish details ourselves.

Take as an example a chilling moment in 'The Treasure of Abbott Thomas', when the central character Somerton recounts his experience of searching for the hidden treasure. Earlier in the story we have been informed that Somerton has undergone some frightful encounter and James builds up the suspense nicely as our desire to know what actually happened to him increases. And then we are told. In the dim

light Somerton reaches through the aperture in the wall of the old well to grasp what he believes will be the secret horde:

> '. . . and my fingers touched something curved, that felt – yes – more or less like leather; dampish it was and evidently part of a heavy full thing. There was nothing, I must say, to alarm one. I grew bolder, and putting both my hands in as well as I could, I pulled it to me, and it came. It was heavy, but it moved more easily than I had expected. As I pulled it towards the entrance, my left elbow knocked over and extinguished the candle. I got the thing fairly in front of the mouth and began drawing it out. Just then Brown gave a sharp ejaculation and ran quickly up the steps with the lantern. He will tell you why in a moment. Startled as I was, I looked round after him, and saw him stand for a minute at the top and then walk away a few yards. 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 its arms round my neck*.'

James's italics emphasise the full horror of the moment. It is a simple phrase but so unexpected and stomach-churning in its implications that it chills the reader to the marrow. Ironically, its sheer simplicity is part of the horror. This is a wonderfully constructed paragraph where gradually light is removed from the scene – the candle falls over and is extinguished and then Somerton's companion, Brown, leaves the scene, taking the lantern with him – so that the final moment is in complete blackness. Also the repetition of the word 'thing' is used cleverly to arouse our apprehension.

Of the same story, the noted crime writer Ruth Rendell observed:

> James has a curious technique of withholding information in a way that allows 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 Abbott 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 an answer he is told there is one thing in Steinfield 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.

Although, in general, James's tales are set in the halls of academia, ancient abbeys or the lonely, isolated locales of his beloved East Coast in a world that has long since disappeared, the nature of the haunting can still seem real and frightening to a modern reader. Often, the apparition in his stories is connected with, or evoked by, some material object, usually one of antiquity which is mundane in itself, like the old drawing in 'Canon Alberic's Scrapbook', the silver Anglo Saxon crown in 'A Warning to the Curious' and the strange curtain pattern in 'The Diary of Mr Poynter' which 'had a subtlety in its drawing'. In the end the means by which the ghost or spirit reveals itself is of less importance than the effect it has on the characters in the story and, of course, the reader. The essential elements of troubled spirits interfering with the world of man involve a fear that remains potent today. The horrors that James creates are timeless.

M. R. James was born in 1862 at Goodnestone Parsonage, Kent, where his father was a curate, but the family moved soon afterwards to Livermore in Sussex. James attended Eton College and later King's College, Cambridge, where he won many awards and scholarships. From 1894 to 1908 he was Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge and from 1905 to 1918 was Provost of King's College. In 1913, he became Vice-Chancellor of the University for two years. In 1918 he was installed as Provost of Eton. A distinguished medievalist and scholar of international status, James published many works on biblical, historical and antiquarian subjects. He was awarded the Order of Merit in 1930.

James's ghost-story writing began almost as a *divertissement* from his academic work and as a form of entertainment for his colleagues. It was in his early days at Cambridge that James initiated the idea of writing a spooky tale to be read aloud to a group of friends after dinner. In October 1893 James presented the first of these tales, 'Canon Alberic's Scrapbook' (originally called 'A Curious Book'), to the Chitchat Society, a regular gathering of colleagues with a literary bent, mostly from King's and Trinity Colleges. The story was a great success and this became the first of many similar occasions. It is not clear when the ritual of James reading one of his ghost stories to his friends at Christmastime

began but the practice was well underway by 1903 when he delighted and chilled his audience with one of his most frightening tales, ' "Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad" '.

On these festive occasions, the party would adjourn to James's private quarters after dinner to hear the new story, which the author admitted was often written at 'fever heat'. Oliffe Richmond, a member of the early Christmas audiences, described such an occasion in his unpublished memoirs:

> Monty disappeared into his bedroom. We sat and waited in the candlelight . . . Monty emerged from his bedroom, manuscript in hand, at last, blew out all the candles but one, by which he seated himself. He then began to read, with more confidence than anyone else could have mustered, his well-nigh illegible script in the dim light.

The aforementioned ' "Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad" ' exhibits all that is best, original and yet paradoxically typical of a James narrative. We have in this tale the ancient object, the unsettling dream and, most important of all, the shock element of the final wonderfully frightening description of the awakened spirit. As in all James's stories where the ghost finally makes an appearance, we are only given a glimpse of the fiend, presented with the scant details which, nevertheless, are enough to send a shiver down our spine.

There is no hysteria or great drama in James's stories. They are told calmly and simply, almost in anecdotal form, and in such a way that when the weird realm of the undead breaks through the calm rational surface of this mundane world the shock is all the greater and the reader is not only terrified but filled with what James himself called that 'pleasurable uncertainty'.

The actor Christopher Lee, a great admirer of James, and of course the star of many a chilling and ghostly movie, made this observation about the author's style:

> He wrote his stories so that we might feel just as if we were reading a newspaper, and his characters seemed at first impression to be the kind you could meet on any street. Then by dint of one phrase or sentence a very different picture would emerge from such an apparently normal situation. To me, that is the very essence of terror.

What is also remarkable about this gentle, reserved and erudite man is that by contrast his own life was fairly uneventful. He was a bookish academic who indulged in writing ghost stories as a kind of escape from

his more serious pursuits. And yet his love of books, academia, ancient tracts and the cloistered life not only informed his fiction but enriched it. These passions became the focus of and inspiration for his stories which have made such an impact on the world of the ghost story and set the high standard for all those authors who followed him.

By the time of his death, Montague Rhodes James had published four collections of his uneasy fictions, *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1904), *More Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1911), *A Thin Ghost and Others* (1919) and *A Warning to the Curious and Other Ghost Stories* (1925), and this volume, an amalgamation of all four, which was first published in 1931, towards the end of his life, and contains all of James's supernatural tales except for three which were published in magazines after this collection had appeared. The enthusiast may find fun in trying to seek them out. They are 'The Experiment' (1931), 'The Malice of Inanimate Objects' (1933) and 'A Vignette' (1936).

From the earliest publications, the stories have attracted many illustrators. One of the first and probably the most famous was James McBryde, a friend of the author. But it seems to me that illustrating the terrors in the James stories defeats the object of the exercise. If you are going to convert the ghostly apparition into one man's vision of the horror, you are stunting the imagination of the reader. The stories are more effective without pictures to signpost what our minds can create for ourselves. It should be remembered that the tales were originally conceived to be read quietly in a dimly lighted room. And that is how they are still best administered.

In *The Collected Ghost Stories* of M. R. James we have the distillation of fear and terror and the high benchmark in ghost-story writing. James's style and effect have been emulated by many, but his success has been rarely matched and never surpassed.

Inevitably, both film and television have manhandled these stories with varying results. The Hollywood movie *Night of the Demon* (*Curse of the Demon*, USA), 1957, based on 'Casting the Runes', was effective in producing its fair share of thrills and chills, but inevitably the story was modernised, opened out, changed and somewhat vulgarised to suit a cinema presentation and so the spirit of James was diminished. Over the years BBC Television has produced some reverential versions of the stories and in general these adaptations have been effective in capturing the mood and essence of the stories. In particular, their version of ' "Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad" ' produced in 1968, came very close to creating the effect that the author achieved in the original. But while an effective dramatisation of a James tale is an unexpected treat, the best way to savour his particular ghostly vintage is

to read the narratives for yourself. In this way you can collude with the author in a private pact, creating your own personal terrors and thus experiencing that 'pleasurable uncertainty'.

David Stuart Davies

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PREFACE

In accordance with a fashion which has recently become common, I am issuing my four volumes of ghost stories under one cover, and appending to them some matter of the same kind.

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, and there does not seem to be much reason for prefacing them by a disquisition upon how I came to write them. Still, a preface is demanded by my publishers, and it may as well be devoted to answering questions which I have been asked.

First, whether the stories are based on my own experience? To this the answer is no: except in one case, specified in the text, where a dream furnished a suggestion. Or again, whether they are versions of other people's experiences? No. Or suggested by books? This is more difficult to answer concisely. Other people have written of dreadful spiders – for instance, Erckmann-Chatrian in an admirable story called 'L'Araignée Crabe' – and of pictures which came alive; the State Trials give the language of Judge Jeffreys and the courts at the end of the seventeenth century; and so on. Places have been more prolific in suggestion: if anyone is curious about my local settings, let it be recorded that S. Bertrand de Comminges and Viborg are real places; that in ' "Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You" ' I had Felixstowe in mind; in 'A School Story', Temple Grove, East Sheen; in 'The Tractate Middoth', Cambridge University Library; in 'Martin's Close', Sampford Courtenay in Devon; that the Cathedrals of Barchester and Southminster were blends of Canterbury, Salisbury and Hereford; that Herefordshire was the imagined scene of 'A View from a Hill'; and Seaburgh in 'A Warning to the Curious' is Aldeburgh in Suffolk.

I am not conscious of other obligations to literature or local legend, written or oral, except in so far as I have tried to make my ghosts act in ways not inconsistent with the rules of folklore. As for the fragments of ostensible erudition which are scattered about my pages, hardly anything in them is not pure invention; there never was, naturally, any such book as that which I quote in 'The Treasure of Abbot Thomas'.

Other questioners ask if I have any theories as to the writing of ghost stories. None that are worthy of the name or need to be repeated here: some thoughts on the subject are in a preface to *Ghosts and Marvels* [The World's Classics, Oxford, 1924]. There is no receipt for success 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.

Supplementary questions are: Do I believe in ghosts? To which I answer that I am prepared to consider evidence and accept it if it satisfies me. And lastly: Am I going to write any more ghost stories? To which I fear I must answer, Probably not.

Since we are nothing if not bibliographical nowadays, I add a paragraph or two setting forth the facts about the several collections and their contents.

Ghost Stories of an Antiquary was published (like the rest) by Messrs Arnold in 1904. The first issue had four illustrations by the late James McBryde. In this volume 'Canon Alberic's Scrapbook' was written in 1894 and printed soon after in the *National Review*; 'Lost Hearts' appeared in the *Pall Mall Magazine*. Of the next five stories, most of which were read to friends at Christmastime at King's College, Cambridge, I only recollect that I wrote 'Number 13' in 1899, while 'The Treasure of Abbot Thomas' was composed in summer 1904.

The second volume, *More Ghost Stories*, appeared in 1911. The first six of the seven tales it contains were Christmas productions, the very first ('A School Story') having been made up for the benefit of the King's College Choir School. 'The Stalls of Barchester Cathedral' was printed in the *Contemporary Review*; 'Mr Humphreys and His Inheritance' was written to fill up the volume.

A Thin Ghost and Others was the third collection, containing five stories and published in 1919. In it, 'An Episode of Cathedral History' and 'The Story of a Disappearance and an Appearance' were contributed to the *Cambridge Review*.

Of the six stories in *A Warning to the Curious*, published in 1925, the first, 'The Haunted Dolls' House', was written for the library of Her Majesty the Queen's Dolls' House, and subsequently appeared in the *Empire Review*. 'The Uncommon Prayer-Book' saw the light in the *Atlantic Monthly*; the title-story in the *London Mercury*; and another, I think 'A Neighbour's Landmark', in an ephemeral called *The Eton Chronicle*. Similar ephemerals were responsible for all but one of the appended pieces (not all of them strictly stories), whereof one, 'Rats', composed for *At Random*, was included by Lady Cynthia Asquith in a collection entitled *Shudders*. The exception, 'Wailing Well', was written

for the Eton College troop of Boy Scouts, and read at their camp-fire at Worbarrow Bay in August 1927. It was then printed by itself in a limited edition by Robert Gathorne Hardy and Kyrle Leng at the Mill House Press, Stanford Dingley.

Four or five of the stories have appeared in collections of such things in recent years, and a Norse version of four from my first volume, by Ragnhild Undset, was issued in 1919 under the title of *Aander og Trolddom*.

M. R. James

Canon Alberic's Scrapbook

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 monopolise 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 quem 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 these 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 on 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 A.D. 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 Nîmes?* 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 scrapbook, On the first of the paper sheets was a plan, carefully drawn and instantly recognisable 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

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

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 has 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 goodness 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.*

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 12mi Dec. 1694: uidebo mox ultimum.
Peccaui et passus sum, plura adhuc passurus. Dec. 29, 1701.†

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.

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

† *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.