



Count Magnus and Other Ghost Stories

M.R. James , S.T. Joshi (Introduction)

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The only annotated edition of M. R. James's writings currently available, Count Magnus and Other Ghost Stories contains the entire first two volumes of James's ghost stories, Ghost Stories of an Antiquary and More Ghost Stories of an Antiquary. These volumes are both the culmination of the nineteenth-century ghost story tradition and the inspiration for much of the best twentieth-century work in this genre. Included in this collection are such landmark tales as "Count Magnus," set in the wilds of Sweden; "Number 13," a distinctive tale about a haunted hotel room; "Casting the Runes," a richly complex tale of sorcery that served as the basis for the classic horror film Curse of the Demon; and "Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad," one of the most frightening tales in literature. The appendix includes several rare texts, including "A Night in King's College Chapel," James's first known ghost story.

Count Magnus and Other Ghost Stories Details

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From Reader Review Count Magnus and Other Ghost Stories for online ebook

Anastasia Fitzgerald-Beaumont says

My grandfather, my father's father, attended Eton College before the Second World War, leaving there for Sandhurst when he was seventeen. During his time at school he got to know M. R. James, who was provost until his death in the summer of 1936. Grandfather was among the successive waves of boys that James introduced to the tingly delights of the ghost story, a genre in which the old master excelled, writing some of the best tales in the English language. He learned to love the ghost story from James just as I was later to learn to love the ghost story from him.

Montague Rhodes James, to give him his full name, was actually a specialist in medieval manuscripts and the provost of King's College, Cambridge as well as Eton. But he is best remembered for his delicious tales of the supernatural, some of the best set in East Anglia, a place of lonely, wind-swept coasts, of unsettled spirits, of hidden Anglo-Saxon crowns and their restless guardians. Who is this who is coming, summoned by a whistle? It might be William Ager, a cat looking to devour those whose curiosity took them too far into a secret past.

I say ghost stories but James really crosses boundaries, resting on less spectral, far more tangible forms of horror. His tales touch on discoveries of things best hidden, of secrets that should never be told, of forces uncovered by antiquarians, forces from which they recoil, unable to close that which has been opened; marvellous stories like *A Warning to the Curious* and *Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to you, My Lad*. Even writing the titles brings a tingle of remembrance! Ranging wider there is *Lost Hearts*, and wider still *Count Magnus* and *The Treasure of Abbot Thomas*.

When I was away at school I took my own copy of James' *Ghost Stories* with me as a night-time companion. I delight in recalling the terrors in reading the stories by torchlight under my duvet after lights out, stopping at every creak and imagined noise! Sir John Betjeman, also a lover of these stories, had a similar early encounter;

In the year 1920 I was a new boy at the Dragon school, Oxford, then called Lynam's, of which the headmaster was C. C. Lynam, known as 'the Skipper'. He dressed and looked like an old Sea Salt, and in his gruff voice would tell us stories by firelight in the boys' room of an evening with all the lights out and his back to the fire. I remember he told the stories as having happened to himself...they were the best stories I ever heard, and gave me an interest in old churches, and country houses, and Scandinavia that not even the mighty Hans Christian Andersen eclipsed.

Skipper was being wonderfully disingenuous because, as Betjeman later discovered, the stories he was claiming as his own reality were in fact the fictions of James. But I can't think of a more delightful way of discovering them, adding a verisimilitude that must have amplified one's sense of terror.

Although some of the stories, *Count Magnus* being a case in point, are set abroad, Scandinavia being a favoured location, they all have a uniquely English feel to them, as unique and as eccentric as their antiquarian narrators or protagonists, really just dimensions of James himself. Fortunately for him, he never crossed boundaries; unfortunately for them, his scholarly protagonists often did. Curiosity is a marvellous thing, but like all marvellous things there are limits that should never be broken. The tales are bags full of atmosphere, heightened, if anything, by a narrative technique that now seems quaintly old fashioned.

I'm older now; the childish terrors have gone, the seduction of fear has gone, though the memory remains. I could never forget Count Magnus; never forget the terrible pursuit through time and distance of poor scholarly Mister Wraxall, who disturbed those who never should have been disturbed;

People still remember last year at Belchamp St Paul how a strange gentleman came one evening in August years back; and how the next morning but one he was found dead, and there was an inquest; and the jury that viewed the body fainted, seven of 'em did, and none of 'em wouldn't speak to what they see, and the verdict was visitation of God; and how the people as kep' the 'ouse moved out that same week, and went away from that part. But they do not, I think, know that any glimmer of light has ever been thrown, or could be thrown, on the mystery. It so happened that last year the little house came into my hands as part of a legacy. It had stood empty since 1863, and there seemed no prospect of letting it; so I had it pulled down, and the papers of which I have given you an abstract were found in a forgotten cupboard under the window in the best bedroom.

As I say, there are some things best left alone!

I once took Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black* away as part of my holiday reading on a trip to Spain. As a story it's good enough, meaning scary enough, though not as good or scary as James. But the context simply did not work. Sun-drenched beaches and warm southern nights dispel the mood. The imagination fails to add the misty shadows that are all part of the experience. The ghost story is for cool, dark English nights, particularly in the depth of winter. Then every creak and unexpected sound is magnified by the senses. One waits in dread for that moment when Count Magnus or William Ager finally opens the door.

Kim says

I loved this book. I think that it is hard to find really good ghost stories. These are great! If you like Victorian fiction, you should love these.

Song says

Just can't put the book down. With the rich knowledge of a Cambridge biblical scholar and the half real half faked England geography, the author weaved the vivid and attractive scenes of dark, monstrous, unspeakable and abhorrent ghost world. The "creatures" in the book are imaginative and won't even be dreamed in the worst nightmares. Oh did I mention the *dreams*? Good luck at night...

Orrin Grey says

After re-reading my Collected Ghost Stories in honor of M.R. James' birthday, I realized a lot of things, not least that I was more enamored of (and more indebted to) M.R. James than I'd realized. So at once I sought out the Penguin editions which, though they contained more or less all the same stories as the Collected Ghost Stories, also contained various notes from James himself, as well as annotations and the like. I'd definitely say these were the definitive volumes, assuming that (like me) you can't get hold of the very nice edition that Ash-Tree Press put out some time ago.

Jim Smith says

The first two collections of M. R. James. Ghost Stories of an Antiquary is one of the great collections of supernatural fiction, and its immediate successor, while perhaps not as ridiculously perfect, gets very little wrong.

The following two collections, which together comprise the later The Haunted Doll's House and Other Ghost Stories volume, contained some essential stuff, but were more uneven, so this first Count Magnus and Other Ghost Stories volume features most of the author's famous stories.

Rowan says

Top notch gothic ghostery. Loved the stories and got some genuine chills. The standout element for me is James' obvious love of archaic language styles . His knack for mimicking 17th and 18th century language is very apparent and he utilises it brilliantly. Lovecraftians and Poeians , I recommend this highly .

??v?? covox says

Excellent!

Suzanne moodhe says

God I love ghost stories! Fall is the best time of year for a little Ray Bradbury, H.P. Lovecraft and now...M.R. James. Ever wonder why ghosts wear sheets? Read the short story, "Oh, Whistle and I'll come to you my lad" and you will understand why. Creepy stories - Lovecraftian, yes but with a wry humor and a more concise style...Other good reads in this book include, "The Rose Garden", "Number 13", "A school tale" and Count Magnus. Happy Hauntings!

Diana says

Some of these were truly excellent, others a little difficult to get through. Overall, though, exactly what I wanted to read this time of year.

Judith says

This is the kind of horror I remember reading in my younger years - originally published in 1931, they are spine-tingling to be sure. I read up on the author (Montague Rhodes - no wonder he used his initials!) and

discovered that he originally wrote these stories to be read aloud in the tradition of Christmas Eve spooky stories. The stories are mostly rural settings and would probably be considered "old-fashioned" by today's youth and not at all like the writings of King and Koontz. Personally, I prefer these over the newer authors of today.

Danielle The Book Huntress (Back to the Books) says

This review is for Count Magnus alone (although I fully intend to read the other stories at some point).

Mr. James has not been called a ghost story-writing master for no reason. He is an expert at building the atmosphere and writing a story that delivers an eerie, creepy thrill to the reader. Although I wouldn't call this one of my favorite stories by him, he was quite successful with this tale about an ill-fated travel-writer who comes upon the mystery of a not-so nice Swedish nobleman with an incredibly unsavory history.

Although the amount of detail in this story will probably bore a reader who is used to a more modern, terse style of writing, I enjoyed James' almost conversational way of telling a story. Those ghost stories that are told as though I am the reader hearing my friend tell me about a real set of events are the most effective to me, because they feel more real, and the unsettling elements have a personal impact since I feel like I am there in the action.

Mr. James builds up the suspense as you hear about Count Magnus, and he leaves certain facts to the reader's imagination. I think that's probably a little more scary. I wondered what was up with the two figures who were apparently stalking Mr. Wraxall. I felt a chill go through my body when Wraxall encounters a sarcophagus that appears to be unlocking itself. What's going to come out of that coffin? What powers does Count Magnus possess, even from beyond the grave?

This story won't work for a reader who wants a more "in your face" style. But for readers who enjoy the old-fashioned, but very creepy and atmospheric ghost/horror story will enjoy this one.

Rating for "Count Magnus": **4 stars**.

Terese says

"Thou shalt seek me in the morning, and I shall not be."

Spooky, cosy and sometimes chilling. MR James is a master of the ghost story (though not as terrifying as Lovecraft) and manages to set the perfect mood to all of his short stories that are all of a surprisingly superb quality. That said I didn't love them all equally but "Lost hearts", "Casting the runes" and "Oh Whistle, and I'll come for you, my lad" will stay with me for a loooong time...

"Quis est iste qui veint"

Martha says

This was my first crack at reading MR James, and I must say I really enjoyed it. Probably not much can be said about his writing that hasn't already been said, but I will give my impressions anyway.

James writes in a much more readable and direct way than some other writers of classic or gothic horror, for example LeFanu. The prose is still elaborate enough to be very satisfying to a reader of classic horror.

I am definitely interested in reading more MR James in the future. My favorite stories in this collection were 'Lost Hearts', 'The Treasure of Abbot Thomas', 'Mr Humphreys and his Inheritance', and 'The Ash-Tree' (because I hate spiders!).

Rachel Seamount says

M.R. James is the man who put “scary” into “scary ghost stories” and as much as I hate to admit it, he was damn good at it. As the man who pioneered turning spooks and haunts into things that actually jumped out and got you, he helped to inspire H.P. Lovecraft’s more well-known macabre tales.

There’s a lot that can be gleaned from James’ writing style, but I’ll leave that to authors more dedicated to horror writing than I am. What I took away from the collection Count Magnus and Other Ghost Stories was that when it comes to the supernatural one shouldn’t be too concerned about explaining mysteries. Ghosts don’t need a reason to terrorize, room 13 existing only at night and being occupied by the devil does not need to be rationalized, we don’t need to fully understand why a man finds himself muttering beside the coffin of a long-dead count while that coffin slowly opens...

It just is. And it’s terrifying to see those specters and ghouls and creatures and dark magic at work. It’s not terrifying to have someone sit down with a pipe beside the fire and explain away the mystery. Something to think about the next time I try to info-dump on my readers via fireside chat.

Eleanore says

I'd been meaning to read something of M.R. James's for a few years now, and since this month I wanted to read only horror and/or ghost stories, this seemed like it was finally the time. I thoroughly enjoyed them all,

a few in particular, and they all in their own ways ended up having a tone of slight but wonderful humor to them I didn't come in expecting. But, most importantly, they are all genuinely creepy. I think "The Mezzotint" might be my favorite of this collection, but it's a tough choice.

Jen says

M.R. James' stories are no doubt enjoyable but they do get a bit repetitive after awhile. Scholar finds weird thing, ghost ensues. This edition was so heavily annotated that I found it took me out of the stories. Some of it was helpful context and some was just distracting. Would certainly read more M.R. James but likely would do so in amongst other works as well so it would break it up a bit.

Scott Rhee says

M.R. James loved to tell ghost stories around the fire, apparently a Christmas tradition in England during the Victorian Period, and someone wisely suggested that he put several of the spookiest ones into book form.

Thus, we have "Count Magnus and Other Ghost Stories", published by Penguin Classics, the only comprehensive collection of his complete stories. Not a lot, to be sure, but enough to paint a picture of a time when people were still terrified by floating bedsheets and whispering wind.

Subsequent horror authors such as H.P. Lovecraft would cite James as an inspiration for their predilection for the supernatural and macabre. By today's standards, James's stories probably aren't all that scary, but more than a few of them still manage to raise the hair on the back of one's neck.

Devon says

A guy finds a mysterious object, upsets a sacred place, or angers a crazy person. Then bad, scary stuff happens. Eventually he dies. Or never speaks of the event again...The stories are good, but generally seem to follow the same plot, outlined above. Plus, its totally obvious that this is a late 19th/early20th century male author. The only women who show up are young maid servants or nagging wives...

Bernadette Donnelly says

A decent set of ghost stories but they are lacking compared to others I have been reading recently.

Riju Ganguly says

There are better, more "reasonably" annotated collections available now, which showcase the absolute genius of M.R. James. But at the time of its publication, this Penguin volume was the only one of its kind. The

erudite and somewhat angry notes from Joshi had helped a lot in understanding some of the references. But the stories ruled!

More powerful than the roar of some king-monster, the stories made crackle of page or drifting of a cloth so terrifying that keeping the lights on seemed a better option before going to sleep. Recommended, obviously!
