

Stanford House Classics - Elementary

GHOST STORIES

M. R. James

literature analysis and response



GHOST STORIES

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MONTAGUE RHODES JAMES
(1862-1936)

M.R. James was the son of a Church of England clergyman. He was educated at the public school of Eton and then went to Cambridge. From 1894 to 1908 he was director of the Cambridge Museum. A distinguished medievalist and scholar of international status, James published many works on biblical, historical and antiquarian subjects. He is best known, however, for his numerous ghost stories and is considered the most brilliant English writer of this genre.



Stanford House

LOST HEARTS

One day in September, 1911 a horse and carriage¹ arrived at the door of Aswarby Hall. A little boy, the only passenger, jumped out and rang the bell. While he was waiting he looked up at the large house and at the garden around it. The boy's name was Stephen Elliot and six months before his mother had died leaving him an orphan². Everyone was very surprised when Mr. Abney, the owner of Aswarby Hall, invited his nephew³ Stephen to go and live with him. Mr. Abney was an old man. He had never been married and he lived a quiet life. He was an expert on pagan religions and spent all his time reading and writing. When he saw Stephen he was very happy.

"How are you, my boy? How are you? How old are you?" he said. "You aren't too tired to eat your supper, I hope."

"No, thank you, sir," answered Stephen, "I'm quite well."

"That's good," said Mr. Abney, "And how old are you, my boy?"

Stephen thought it was a strange question to ask twice in two minutes, at their first meeting.

"I'm twelve years old next birthday, sir," he answered.

"And when is your birthday, dear boy?"

"The eleventh of September, sir."

"That's good. Very good. Almost a year from now, isn't it? I like to – ha! ha! – I like to write these things in my book. Sure it's twelve? Certain?"

"Yes, quite sure, sir."

"Well, well," said Stephen's uncle, rubbing⁴ his hands, "take the boy down to Mrs. Bunch," he said to the butler, "and let him have his supper."

Mrs. Bunch was the nicest person at Aswarby Hall. She was kind to Stephen and made him feel at home. She told him lots of things about the house and the garden. Soon Stephen knew all the rooms in the house, except his uncle's study which he was not allowed⁵ to enter.

1. Match the following.

Aswarby Hall	12-year-old orphan
Mr. Abney	died in April 1911
Stephen Elliot	kind, friendly woman
Mrs. Elliot	old, unmarried gentleman
Mrs. Bunch	large country house

2. Now complete the following.

e.g. Mr. Abney surprised everyone by *inviting* Stephen to go and live with him.

- Mr. Abney went out; he spent all his time reading and writing.
- Mr. Abney wanted to know Stephen's
- Mr. Abney many things in his book.
- Stephen thought Mr. Abney was rather
- Stephen liked best.
- Stephen went into his uncle's study.

1. carriage: vehicle pulled by horses.

2. orphan: person whose parents are dead.

3. nephew: the son of one's brother/sister.

4. rubbing: moving one on the other to show satisfaction.

5. allowed: permitted.

One November evening he asked Mrs. Bunch:

"Is Mr. Abney a good man? Will he go to heaven¹?"

"Good?" answered Mrs. Bunch, "oh yes, he's a very good and kind man. Do you know that once, about seven years ago, he took a little boy in from the street. And another time there was a little girl he brought home, too."

"Tell me about them," cried Stephen excitedly.

So Mrs. Bunch began.

"One day the Master came back from his walk with a little girl and told me to take care of her. She was a poor child, an orphan, and I think she was a gypsy². She stayed with us for three weeks. Then one day..." here Mrs. Bunch sighed³ as she remembered, "one day she disappeared. The Master was very sad. He ordered the gardeners to search⁴ everywhere, even in the lake. But I think the gypsies came and took her away. That night I heard voices in the woods and strange singing round the house. And the next morning she had gone."

"And what about the boy?" asked Stephen.

"Ah, that poor boy!" sighed Mrs. Bunch. "He wasn't English. His name was Giovanni. One day he came up the drive playing his hurdy-gurdy..."

"What's a hurdy-gurdy?"

"It's an organ that plays music. Look, there it is, over there."

Well, as I was saying, he came up the drive⁵ playing it and the Master took him in immediately. He asked him lots of questions – how old he was, where he came from, where his family was. He said he had no family. He didn't speak English very well. But the Master was so kind to him. Then the same thing happened to him. One morning he wasn't here any more. He got up early and left. We'll never know why. Poor boy."

After these stories Stephen didn't sleep very well. He had a curious dream⁶ that night. He dreamed he was at the top of the house, outside the door of an old

3. Answer the following questions.

a) Who brought the little girl to the house?

.....

b) Did the girl have a family?

.....

c) How long did she stay?

.....

d) What happened one day?

.....

e) What did Mrs. Bunch believe had happened?

.....

f) What did Mrs. Bunch hear in the night?

.....

4. Make questions for these answers.

a) He was Italian.

.....

b) He came by himself.

.....

c) No, he was an orphan.

.....

d) He was very kind to him.

.....

e) No, he left it in the house.

.....

f) They never knew.

.....

1. heaven: paradise.

2. gypsy: nomadic person.

3. sighed: made a long sound indicating sadness.

4. to search: to look for.

5. drive: private road leading to the house.

6. dream: what we imagine while sleeping.

disused bathroom at the end of a long corridor. There was a window over the door and he looked in. In the moonlight he could see an old bath and in the bath there was a person – very thin and small, covered in a piece of material and with the hands crossed over the heart¹.

While he was watching, he heard a faint moan² and the arms began to move. The terror caused Stephen to move and he woke up. But he wasn't in bed! He was standing in the corridor outside the bathroom! With incredible courage he looked inside but this time the bath was empty.

The next day he told Mr. Abney about his adventure. "How very interesting," said his uncle, "I must write it in my book."

When he told Mrs. Bunch she immediately went and put a curtain³ over the window.

Spring was coming and Mr. Abney told Stephen that it was a dangerous time for the young.

"Take care of yourself," he said, "and shut your window at night."

At about this time, two events happened that made an impression on Stephen. One was after a very bad night he had, though⁴ he couldn't remember his dreams. But the next day Mrs. Bunch asked him:

"What did you do in the night, master Stephen? Look at your nightshirt. It's all torn⁵!"

Stephen looked and saw that it was, indeed, very badly torn, all down the left side. He couldn't understand.

"They look like the scratches⁶ on my door," he said.

Mrs. Bunch stared⁷ at him, then ran upstairs to see.

"My goodness!" she cried. "Who did that? It can't be a cat or a dog because they are too high. They look like a Chinaman's fingernails, as my father used to say! Don't tell the Master, he'll only worry. And always lock your door."

5. Describe a dream of yours. Begin like this:

One night I dreamed that

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

6. State whether the following are TRUE (T) or FALSE (F).

e.g. Stephen always used that bathroom.	T	F	✓
a) The person in the bath moved.	T	F	
b) Stephen woke up because he was terrified.	T	F	
c) He remembered going upstairs.	T	F	
d) When he was awake he did not look inside the bathroom.	T	F	
e) His uncle was angry with him.	T	F	
f) Mrs. Bunch did not want Stephen to look through the window again.	T	F	

- 1. heart: vital organ.
- 2. faint moan: low sound showing sadness.
- 3. curtain: material for covering windows.
- 4. though: even if.
- 5. torn: pulled to pieces.
- 6. scratches: marks made by nails or claws.
- 7. stared: looked carefully, showing surprise.