

## A Literary Gothic StudyGuide

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### M. R. James, “Canon Alberic’s Scrapbook”

This tale, widely believed to be James’ first ghost story, was first published in the *National Review* in March 1895; first book publication was in James’ famed collection *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1904). The tale was probably written in 1892 or, at the latest, by October of 1893, when a few days before Halloween James first read the story to a group of his friends.

### General Considerations:

There are quite a number of autobiographical elements present in this tale; for a full consideration of them, see the notes to this story in the edition of *Casting the Runes and Other Ghost Stories* by M. R. James, edited by Michael Cox (Oxford UP, 1987). While sometimes this sort of thing is irrelevant, and while heavy reliance on autobiographical material often characterizes the earliest work of an author, there just may be something more going on in this case.

James, widely regarded as one of the greatest Western practitioners of the ghost story, is particularly known for the “antiquarian ghost story,” one which involves some sort of artifact from and/or researches into the past (old books, old buildings, old tombs, etc). As James’ first ghost story, this piece may well reflect more than just the first plot he could think of; given the presence of so many autobiographical elements, this tale may well represent something of a compendium of James’ thinking about the ghost story and the Gothic tradition (to use the term rather loosely). It may also – and this would not be coincidental, since the Gothic, in my opinion, has always been very much about this very subject - have something to say about the relationship between the present and the past, perhaps something to do with the forms of transmission of culture and knowledge – a subject in which James, a professional antiquarian and museum administrator, obviously had a deep interest. What is a scrapbook, after all? What about this particular scrapbook? Canon Alberic has committed a sort of “crime” against culture by cutting pages out of various ancient (and undoubtedly priceless) manuscripts and books and pasting them into his scrapbook, but even “crimes” can tell us much about culture, history, humanity.

As a collection of documents and images, the Canon’s (fictional) scrapbook has something significant in common with the three great horror narratives of the nineteenth century: **Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein***, **Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde***, and **Bram Stoker’s *Dracula***. These works are all narratives composed of other narratives: letters, journal entries, stories, newspaper clippings, wills, etc. “Canon Alberic’s Scrap-book,” while a unified narrative, offers us a fictional cultural artifact that is a sort of multi-media version of the “collage” narratives of *Frankenstein*,

*Jekyll and Hyde*, and *Dracula*. And what happens – especially in *Dracula* and “Canon Alberic” – when the past comes back, when it obtrudes into the present?

Something else to think about: if you haven't read *Jekyll and Hyde*, do so, and compare the description of Edward Hyde with that of the demonic creature in James' tale, paying particular attention to the descriptions, in both works, of the hands. And think also of **Joseph Sheridan LeFanu's** “Green Tea,” with its demonic monkey. James is clearly a master of the short ghost story, and took it places it hadn't quite been before, but his work is also in synch with other concerns and currents that informed much later Victorian gothic-tradition literature.

Take note also of the religious elements of this story, and how it crosses denominational boundaries: Dennistoun, who explains late in the story that he is a Presbyterian, nonetheless pays to have Masses said (and then complains about the price) for Canon Alberic's “rest.” Notice in particular the language he uses when explaining to his friend (the narrator) that he has just paid for the Masses. Note also Dennistoun's (reluctant) acceptance of the crucifix from the verger's daughter – like Jonathan Harker in **Bram Stoker's** *Dracula*, he clearly has no religious use for such a thing, and accepts it only to be polite. Yet look what use he makes of it. Notice also that Dennistoun quotes from two books of the Bible, one of them Apocryphal (see the note below on Ecclesiasticus).

Finally, it was fairly characteristic of James to not explain everything in his ghost stories; he wanted a certain sense of mystery and distance. He certainly achieves that effect here: what exactly *is* the demon in the drawing? Why did it torment the verger, who seems to have done nothing but inhabit the former house of Canon Alberic? Why does its appearance seem connected to the drawing made by Alberic, but not to the photograph of the drawing? Does simply burning the drawing exorcise the demon? And why did Alberic come across the demon? What is the “sin” he refers to in that inscription on the back of the drawing? Questions, questions, questions....

Sources used in this StudyGuide: “OED” = *Oxford English Dictionary*

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Canon Alberic's Scrap-book = a “canon,” in this sense, is a minor church official usually associated with the governance of a particular cathedral and the region it serves.

St. Bertrand de Comminges = an actual town in the Pyrenees (mountain range in the south of France; the Anglo pronunciation is “peer-uh-knees”); James first visited this town in 1892. [ **photo of the exterior of the St. Bertrand cathedral** ]

“a bishopric until the Revolution” = a bishopric is the town in a diocese (a geographic region overseen by a bishop) where the bishop has his office; such towns usually had a cathedral, which was the church (larger and fancier than most churches) that served as the bishop's “home office.” The French Revolution confiscated a great deal of property belonging to the Roman Catholic church and took a great deal of power and influence

away from the clergy by limiting their rights to preach and say Mass, eventually driving many into exile or underground.

“a Cambridge man” = one who had graduated from Cambridge University in England. Women were able to attend and even graduate from Cambridge by the 1890s, although without full university status and privileges. James himself attended Cambridge and was later a teacher and administrator there.

“to use several dozens of plates” = photographic plates or exposures

“verger or sacristan” = a verger is a minor church official charged with taking care of the church interior; a sacristan is a sexton, whose responsibilities included church vestments (clothing worn by priests during the celebration of Mass and other rituals) and, usually, digging graves and ringing bells at weddings and funerals.

Chapeau Rouge = “red hat” (French); in the Roman Catholic religion, cardinals are given red hats as part of their formal regalia. Is this another example of a crossing of denominational boundaries?

“termagant wife” = “A violent, overbearing, turbulent, brawling, quarrelsome woman” (OED); such a woman, if married, would almost certainly have a “henpecked” husband, that is, one who is picked on, abused, and maltreated.

*déjeuner* = lunch (French)

“St. Bertrand’s ivory crozier” = St. Bertrand is the C7 Catholic saint for whom the town and cathedral are named; a crozier is the long staff (with a rounded “hook” end, similar to a shepherd’s crook) carried by a Bishop (or one of his attendants) on ceremonial occasions.

“the dusty stuffed crocodile that hangs over the font” = an actual detail from the church, recorded by James in his notebooks – like Dennistoun in this story, James frequently visited churches and other old buildings on his travels, and make extensive notes and sketches. font = baptismal font, a large basin, usually marble, in which infants are baptized into the Catholic faith

“choir-screen of Bishop John de Mauléon” = a choir-screen is a large, decorated or carved screen, made of wood or stone, which separated the choir from the rest of the cathedral. Jean de Mauléon was the Bishop of Comminges in the early C16. Some photos of the choir-screen, regarded as something of a masterpiece by architectural historians, are available [here](#).

“the miracles of St. Bertrand” = St. Bertrand has been associated with over a dozen miracles, including several involving the miraculous appearance or abundance of food

daub = a derisive term for a poorly executed painting or work of art

monomaniac = someone with an all-consuming and obsessive focus on one thing or idea; see Edgar Allan Poe’s “[Berenicë](#)” for a Gothic example.

“time to ring the Angelus” = a prayer which, in older forms of Roman Catholic worship, was repeated to the sound of a bell at morning, noon, and sunset.

“the salutation of the angel” = the greeting of the angel Gabriel to Mary, the mother of Jesus; this event is commemorated in the “Angelus,” mentioned in the previous note (see Luke 1: 26-35).

*amateur de vieux livres* = “amateur of old books”; a student or collector of old books and manuscripts, as was M. R. James himself. Actually, he was a *professional* of old books and manuscripts....

“a stupid missal of Plantin’s printing” = Christophe Plantin was a C16 French printer

“decoyed into some purlieu” = being fooled into some dangerous territory, some seedy back alley or other such “marginal” place where he might be robbed

“the character of an oratory” = an oratory was a small chapel or room set aside for prayer

“too large for a missal and not the shape of an antiphoner” = a missal is a book which contains the text of the Roman Catholic Mass; an antiphoner contains those parts of the religious service sung by the choir in response to prayers by the priest

Psalter = a version of the Book of Psalms

“twenty leaves of uncial writing” = “leaves” is “pages”; uncial writing is a type of handwriting “having the large rounded forms (not joined to each other) characteristic of early Greek and Latin manuscripts” (OED)

“patristic treatise” = patristic, from the Latin word for “father” (*pater*, which gives us “paternal”) refers to the “Church Fathers,” those early writers and thinkers whose interpretations and analyses of Biblical material gave shape to the Roman Catholic church. A “treatise” is a long, formal essay.

“the copy of Papias ‘On the Words of Our Lord’” = a 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century text, now lost, written by Papias, a Bishop of the late first / early second century

“Mr Minor-Canon Quatremain in “Old St. Paul’s” = *Old St. Pauls* is a novel (1841) by **William Harrison Ainsworth**. Quatremain is a character who uses astrology to attempt to locate hidden treasure.

“It was drawn from the life.” = drawn by someone who actually saw the demon; not drawn from hearsay or from another drawing. We get confirmation of this fact from the inscription on the back of the drawing, which is that chunk of Latin that occurs near the end of the story.

“two hundred and fifty francs, not more” = James doesn’t explain the sacristan’s insistence on this sale price despite Dennistoun’s offers to pay him more; why do you think James includes this?

“like Gehazi” = a reference to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Book of Kings, Chapter 5, in which Gehazi, the servant of Elisha, collects a payment that his master, having cured a man of leprosy, had refused to accept. Gehazi is punished by Elisha for having behaved thus.

“*salle à manger*” = dining room (French)

“*Deux fois je l’ai vu; mille fois je l’ai senti*” = twice I have seen it, a thousand times I have felt it

versicle (the “V.” in the Latin passage that occurs 3 paragraphs before the end of the story) = a brief phrase or line sung, as part of church service, in response to a prayer said or sung by the priest

“*Psalm. Whoso dwelleth (xci)*” = xci is, of course, the Latin rendering of “91.” Psalm 91 begins “Whoso dwelleth under the defence of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.”

*Gallia Christiana* = a chronicle, first appearing the early C17, documenting various aspects of religious institutions and establishments in France. “Sammarthani” = a corruption of “Sainte-Marthe,” as in Denys de Sainte-Marthe, a monk who revised the *Gallia Christiana* in the C18. It is significant, in James’ tale, that the date of Canon Alberic’s death is noted in this book although that sort of detail is rarely found there.

Ecclesiasticus = not the Book of Ecclesiastes, but another book, in the Apocrypha of the Old Testament; the Apocrypha is a collection of books regarded as scriptural by Roman Catholicism. The verse quoted by Dennistoun is 39:33.

“night monsters living in the ruins of Babylon” = see Isaiah 34:11, which refers to the desolation of Edom, and its being inhabited by three different species of owls; Isaiah 23: 13 refers to the destruction of Babylon by the Assyrians, who have rendered the once-great city “a place for desert creatures” (a more common translation that “night monsters”) — desert creatures, of course, are usually active at night in order to avoid the searing heat of the day.

“an effigy of the Canon in a large wig and soutane” = a soutane is “A long buttoned gown or frock, with sleeves, forming the ordinary outer garment of Roman Catholic ecclesiastics, and worn under the vestments in religious services; a cassock” (OED); hence this marble effigy or statue of the Canon shows him in his formal religious attire.

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