

A SCHOOL STORY,
THE HAUNTED DOLLS' HOUSE,
& WAILING WELL

Three Puzzling Ghost Stories by
M. R. JAMES

Edited, Annotated, and Illustrated By
M. GRANT KELLERMEYER, M.A.



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This edition published 2021 by
OLDSTYLE TALES PRESS
2424 N. Anthony Blvd
Fort Wayne, Indiana
46805-3604

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*Concerning What
You Are About to Read*

THE following three stories did not exactly fit into the criterion of our parent James anthology, *A Warning to the Curious, Count Magnus, and Other Horrors: The Very Best Ghost Stories of M. R. James*. Aside from my own opinion, I based this decision on the findings of at least three polls of James scholars, readers, and fans which have shown that they regularly score low on rankings of the best M. R. James stories. However, they have not remotely attracted the kind of universal vitriol of, say, “Two Doctors” or “At Night in the Playing Fields,” or even the sluggish disinterest which buries the likes of “A Neighbor’s Landmark,” “The Uncommon Prayer-book,” or “The Malice of Inanimate Objects” in obscurity.

Indeed, while these three stories are each far from masterpieces, they share a mysteriousness and ghoulish aesthetic which has attracted a notable amount of attention from James’ readership. All three are rather puzzling: in the first we have the enigmatic relationship between the haunted tutor and the skeletal ghost who infiltrates his Latin lessons (*how do they know one another? What is the back story?*); in the second we have the motives that lead to the grandfather’s murder and the means by which he revenges himself on the grandchildren (*is he the frog-like ghoul that frightens them to death? If so, why target the children rather than the parents?*); in the third we have the haunting secret behind the inhabitants of Wailing Well (*why are they “three women and a man”? Who are they? What happened to them? What do they want/need?*). Each of these stories deserves a good look, although I can’t justify including them in a collection of James’ “very best” stories.

I will say – in full disclosure – that “Wailing Well” actually is one of my favorites among James’ stories, and that “The Haunted Dolls’ House” was the first story of his that I ever read, so I do have a bias in favor of at least these two tales. So feel free to come along with me to delve more deeply into these three puzzling pieces, and if you would like to sample more of James’ genuine masterworks, you can do so by acquiring our primary collection at www.oldstyletales.com/mrjames.

*M. Grant Kellermeyer
Fort Wayne, October 2021*

“A School Story” ranks among James’ vaguely-defined puzzlers, and – like so many of his puzzlers, including “Two Doctors” and “An Evening’s Entertainment” – it has had mixed reception. Every now and then, especially as he grew older, James seemed to delight in writing an inscrutable tale that may have laid out all of its cards, or may be holding some back: perhaps we knew all we needed to know, or perhaps the story was hiding a few clues as to its true meaning. These stories almost always involved an indirect haunting that is experienced vicariously, and involve a great deal of tantalizing suggestion without a clear-cut explanation. It is noteworthy that many of James most beloved stories also involve a good deal of unanswered questions (“Oh, Whistle,” “Canon Alberic,” and “The Ash-Tree” among them), but his real puzzlers pull away from the action just far enough that it becomes virtually dream-like and truly weird. “A School Story” is probably the best of this class, and although it has detractors, its reliance on suggestion and the reader’s own creativity cause it to be something like a silhouette: we see the outline of the basic story, but are forced to fill in the gaps (which can be exciting or tedious depending on your preference). This particular tale may have a reason for its lack of details: it was originally written to entertain the young choristers of King’s College, and being made for a younger audience may have led to more emphasis on general spookiness (and the drudgery of school which his audience must have identified with) as opposed to the dark details motivating its vengeful ghost. It also appears to have fairly autobiographical inspiration: a variety of commentators have connected the eponymous school with James’ own preparatory school – Temple Grove near Richmond Park in London’s southwestern suburbs – which he began attending in 1873 from the ages of 10 to 13. While he eventually looked back on his friendships and education fondly, he considered the rainy day that he first arrived there to be one of the saddest in his life.

A School Story
{1911}

TWO men in a smoking-room were talking of their private-school days. 'At our school,' said A., 'we had a ghost's footmark on the staircase. What was it like? Oh, very unconvincing. Just the shape of a shoe, with a square toe, if I remember right. The staircase was a stone one. I never heard any story about the thing. That seems odd, when you come to think of it. Why didn't somebody invent one, I wonder?'

'You never can tell with little boys. They have a mythology of their own. There's a subject for you, by the way—"The Folklore of Private Schools".'

'Yes; the crop is rather scanty, though. I imagine, if you were to investigate the cycle of ghost stories, for instance, which the boys at private schools tell each other, they would all turn out to be highly-compressed versions of stories out of books.'

'Nowadays the *Strand* and *Pearson's*, and so on, would be extensively drawn upon.'

'No doubt: they weren't born or thought of in *my* time. Let's see. I wonder if I can remember the staple ones that I was told. First, there was the house with a room in which a series of people insisted on passing a night; and each of them in the morning was found kneeling in a corner, and had just time to say, "I've seen it," and died.'

'Wasn't that the house in Berkeley Square²?

'I dare say it was. Then there was the man who heard a noise in the passage at night, opened his door, and saw someone crawling towards him on all fours with his eye hanging out on his cheek. There was besides, let me think—Yes! the room where a man was found dead in bed with a horseshoe mark on his forehead, and the floor under the bed was covered with marks of horseshoes also; I don't know why. Also there was the lady who, on locking her bedroom door in a strange house, heard a thin voice among the bed-curtains say, "Now we're shut in for the night." None of those had any explanation or sequel. I wonder if they go on still, those stories.'

'Oh, likely enough—with additions from the magazines, as I said. You never heard, did you, of a real ghost at a private school? I thought not; nobody has that ever I came across.'

¹ Both of these were periodical magazines that began publishing in the 1890s and were known for – among other things – their speculative fiction stories and serials: mysteries, horror, science fiction, weird tales, and action adventures. They published works by such names as H. G. Wells, Rudyard Kipling, W. W. Jacobs, E. Nesbit, and – most famously – Arthur Conan Doyle, whose Sherlock Holmes stories primarily ran in *The Strand*

² The most famous haunted house in London – 50 Berkeley Square – was said to be the site of a dangerous haunting which had driven servants insane and left some daredevils dead of terror. A Georgian townhouse in fashionable Mayfair, it was said to be haunted by the ghost of an 18th century woman who died in the attic (either by neglect or suicide). The most famous tale – printed in the *Mayfair Magazine* in 1879 and fictionalized by ghost story writer Rhoda Broughton in her chilling tale, "The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing But the Truth" – details how after a maid goes mad from encountering the Thing in the haunted room, a dashing young nobleman cheekily demands to spend the night there. Despite the concerns of the owners he races upstairs to begin his vigil. It isn't long however, before the bell to the haunted room begins ringing like mad: the hosts and their guests rush upstairs to find the brave man struck dumb with abject terror, merely getting out the words "I have seen it" before either falling dead of fear or shooting his brains out

'From the way in which you said that, I gather that you have.'

'I really don't know; but this is what was in my mind. It happened at my private school thirty odd years ago, and I haven't any explanation of it.

'The school I mean was near London. It was established in a large and fairly old house—a great white building with very fine grounds about it; there were large cedars in the garden, as there are in so many of the older gardens in the Thames valley, and ancient elms in the three or four fields which we used for our games. I think probably it was quite an attractive place, but boys seldom allow that their schools possess any tolerable features.

'I came to the school in a September, soon after the year 1870; and among the boys who arrived on the same day was one whom I took to: a Highland³ boy, whom I will call McLeod. I needn't spend time in describing him: the main thing is that I got to know him very well. He was not an exceptional boy in any way—not particularly good at books or games—but he suited me.

'The school was a large one: there must have been from 120 to 130 boys there as a rule, and so a considerable staff of masters was required, and there were rather frequent changes among them.

'One term—perhaps it was my third or fourth—a new master made his appearance. His name was Sampson. He was a tallish, stoutish, pale, black-bearded man. I think we liked him: he had travelled a good deal, and had stories which amused us on our school walks, so that there was some competition among us to get within earshot of him. I remember too—dear me, I have hardly thought of it since then!—that he had a charm on his watch-chain that attracted my attention one day, and he let me examine it. It was, I now suppose, a gold Byzantine⁴ coin; there was an effigy of some absurd emperor on one side; the other side had been worn practically smooth, and he had had cut on it—rather barbarously—his own initials, G.W.S., and a date, 24 July, 1865. Yes, I can see it now: he told me he had picked it up in Constantinople⁵: it was about the size of a florin⁶, perhaps rather smaller.

'Well, the first odd thing that happened was this. Sampson was doing Latin grammar with us. One of his favourite methods—perhaps it is rather a good one—was to make us construct sentences out of our own heads to illustrate the rules he was trying to make us learn. Of course that is a thing which gives a silly boy a chance of being impertinent: there are lots of school stories in which that happens—or anyhow there might be. But Sampson was too good a disciplinarian for us to think of trying that on with him. Now, on

³ That is, one from northern Scotland

⁴ A branch of the Roman Empire, covering much of the eastern Mediterranean territories (especially modern-day Greece, Turkey, and the Balkans) which outlived the Western Roman and lasted until the Ottoman Empire overtook it in 1453

⁵ Modern-day Istanbul

⁶ A two-penny British coin which was about one inch or 30mm across

this occasion he was telling us how to express *remembering* in Latin: and he ordered us each to make a sentence bringing in the verb *memini*, "I remember." Well, most of us made up some ordinary sentence such as "I remember my father," or "He remembers his book," or something equally uninteresting: and I dare say a good many put down *memino librum meum*⁷, and so forth: but the boy I mentioned—McLeod—was evidently thinking of something more elaborate than that. The rest of us wanted to have our sentences passed, and get on to something else, so some kicked him under the desk, and I, who was next to him, poked him and whispered to him to look sharp. But he didn't seem to attend. I looked at his paper and saw he had put down nothing at all. So I jogged him again harder than before and upbraided him sharply for keeping us all waiting. That did have some effect. He started and seemed to wake up, and then very quickly he scribbled about a couple of lines on his paper, and showed it up with the rest. As it was the last, or nearly the last, to come in, and as Sampson had a good deal to say to the boys who had written *meminiscimus patri meo*⁸ and the rest of it, it turned out that the clock struck twelve before he had got to McLeod, and McLeod had to wait afterwards to have his sentence corrected. There was nothing much going on outside when I got out, so I waited for him to come. He came very slowly when he did arrive, and I guessed there had been some sort of trouble. "Well," I said, "what did you get?" "Oh, I don't know," said McLeod, "nothing much: but I think Sampson's rather sick with me." "Why, did you show him up some rot?" "No fear," he said. "It was all right as far as I could see: it was like this: *Memento*—that's right enough for remember, and it takes a genitive⁹,—*memento putei inter quatuor taxos*." "What silly rot!" I said. "What made you shove that down? What does it mean?" "That's the funny part," said McLeod. "I'm not quite sure what it does mean. All I know is, it just came into my head and I corked it down. I know what I *think* it means, because just before I wrote it down I had a sort of picture of it in my head: I believe it means 'Remember the well among the four'—what are those dark sort of trees that have red berries on them?" "Mountain ashes, I s'pose you mean." "I never heard of them," said McLeod; "no, *I'll* tell you—yews." "Well, and what did Sampson say?" "Why, he was jolly odd about it. When he read it he got up and went to the mantelpiece and stopped quite a long time without saying anything, with his back to me. And then he said, without turning round, and rather quiet, 'What do you suppose that means?' I told him what I thought; only I couldn't remember the name of the silly tree: and then he wanted to know why I put it

⁷ Sloppy Latin for "I remember my book"

⁸ Bad Latin for "I remember my father"

⁹ Usually this means a noun that demonstrates possession of another noun ("group of people"), but in Latin the genitive case can mean several different things, and is often used (in this case, with the word "putei") in conjunction with the word "memento"

down, and I had to say something or other. And after that he left off talking about it, and asked me how long I'd been here, and where my people lived, and things like that: and then I came away: but he wasn't looking a bit well."

"I don't remember any more that was said by either of us about this. Next day McLeod took to his bed with a chill or something of the kind, and it was a week or more before he was in school again. And as much as a month went by without anything happening that was noticeable. Whether or not Mr Sampson was really startled, as McLeod had thought, he didn't show it. I am pretty sure, of course, now, that there was something very curious in his past history, but I'm not going to pretend that we boys were sharp enough to guess any such thing.

"There was one other incident of the same kind as the last which I told you. Several times since that day we had had to make up examples in school to illustrate different rules, but there had never been any row except when we did them wrong. At last there came a day when we were going through those dismal things which people call Conditional Sentences¹⁰, and we were told to make a conditional sentence, expressing a future consequence. We did it, right or wrong, and showed up our bits of paper, and Sampson began looking through them. All at once he got up, made some odd sort of noise in his throat, and rushed out by a door that was just by his desk. We sat there for a minute or two, and then—I suppose it was incorrect—but we went up, I and one or two others, to look at the papers on his desk. Of course I thought someone must have put down some nonsense or other, and Sampson had gone off to report him. All the same, I noticed that he hadn't taken any of the papers with him when he ran out. Well, the top paper on the desk was written in red ink—which no one used—and it wasn't in anyone's hand who was in the class. They all looked at it—McLeod and all—and took their dying oaths that it wasn't theirs. Then I thought of counting the bits of paper. And of this I made quite certain: that there were seventeen bits of paper on the desk, and sixteen boys in the form. Well, I bagged the extra paper, and kept it, and I believe I have it now. And now you will want to know what was written on it. It was simple enough, and harmless enough, I should have said.

"*"Si tu non veneris ad me, ego veniam ad te,"* which means, I suppose, "If you don't come to me, I'll come to you."

'Could you show me the paper?' interrupted the listener.

'Yes, I could: but there's another odd thing about it. That same afternoon I took it out of my locker—I know for certain it was the same bit, for I made a finger-mark on it—and no single trace of writing of any kind was there on it. I kept it, as I said, and since that time I have tried various experiments to see whether sympathetic ink had been used, but absolutely without result.

¹⁰ Sentences that include an "if/then" statement



'So much for that. After about half an hour Sampson looked in again: said he had felt very unwell, and told us we might go. He came rather gingerly to his desk and gave just one look at the uppermost paper: and I suppose he thought he must have been dreaming: anyhow, he asked no questions.

'That day was a half-holiday, and next day Sampson was in school again, much as usual. That night the third and last incident in my story happened.

'We—McLeod and I—slept in a dormitory at right angles to the main building. Sampson slept in the main building on the first floor. There was a very bright full moon. At an hour which I can't tell exactly, but some time between one and two, I was woken up by somebody shaking me. It was McLeod; and a nice state of mind he seemed to be in. "Come," he said,—*"come! there's a burglar getting in through Sampson's window."* As soon as I could speak, I said, "Well, why not call out and wake everybody up?" "No, no," he said, "I'm not sure who it is: don't make a row: come and look." Naturally I came and looked, and naturally there was no one there. I was cross enough, and should have called McLeod plenty of names: only—I couldn't tell why—it seemed to me that there *was* something wrong—something that made me very glad I wasn't alone to face it. We were still at the window looking out, and as soon as I could, I asked him what he had heard or seen. "I didn't *hear* anything at all," he said, "but about five minutes before I woke you, I found myself looking out of this window here, and there was a man sitting or kneeling on Sampson's window-sill, and looking in, and I thought he was beckoning." "What sort of man?" McLeod wriggled. "I don't know," he said, "but I can tell you one thing—he was beastly thin: and he looked as if he was wet all over: and," he said, looking round and whispering as if he hardly liked to hear himself, "I'm not at all sure that he was alive."

'We went on talking in whispers some time longer, and eventually crept back to bed. No one else in the room woke or stirred the whole time. I believe we did sleep a bit afterwards, but we were very cheap next day.

'And next day Mr Sampson was gone: not to be found: and I believe no trace of him has ever come to light since. In thinking it over, one of the oddest things about it all has seemed to me to be the fact that neither McLeod nor I ever mentioned what we had seen to any third person whatever. Of course no questions were asked on the subject, and if they had been, I am inclined to believe that we could not have made any answer: we seemed unable to speak about it.

'That is my story,' said the narrator. 'The only approach to a ghost story connected with a school that I know, but still, I think, an approach to such a thing.'



The sequel to this may perhaps be reckoned highly conventional; but a sequel there is, and so it must be produced. There had been more than one listener to

the story, and, in the latter part of that same year, or of the next, one such listener was staying at a country house in Ireland.

One evening his host was turning over a drawer full of odds and ends in the smoking-room. Suddenly he put his hand upon a little box. 'Now,' he said, 'you know about old things; tell me what that is.' My friend opened the little box, and found in it a thin gold chain with an object attached to it. He glanced at the object and then took off his spectacles to examine it more narrowly. 'What's the history of this?' he asked. 'Odd enough,' was the answer. 'You know the yew thicket in the shrubbery: well, a year or two back we were cleaning out the old well that used to be in the clearing here, and what do you suppose we found?'

'Is it possible that you found a body?' said the visitor, with an odd feeling of nervousness.

'We did that: but what's more, in every sense of the word, we found two.'

'Good Heavens! Two? Was there anything to show how they got there? Was this thing found with them?'

'It was. Amongst the rags of the clothes that were on one of the bodies. A bad business, whatever the story of it may have been. One body had the arms tight round the other. They must have been there thirty years or more—long enough before we came to this place. You may judge we filled the well up fast enough. Do you make anything of what's cut on that gold coin you have there?'

'I think I can,' said my friend, holding it to the light (but he read it without much difficulty); 'it seems to be G.W.S., 24 July, 1865.'

JAMES reckons his conclusion to be "highly conventional" because, in a sense, it very much is. Several elements from the story have been grafted from two particular stories – classics of the horror genre which are covered, in their own right, in Oldstyle Tales' anthologies of their respective authors: W. W. Jacobs' "The Well" and F. Marion Crawford's "Man Overboard!" James was familiar with both of these stories and specifically praised both men's work in his 1929 essay "Some Remarks on Ghost Stories." Both were published within four months of each other (December 1902 – April 1903), and both have distinctly "Jamesian" qualities. Knowing a little about their plots may help to suggest some possibilities for this otherwise inscrutable ending.

II.

Jacobs' story begins with two grown cousins, Benson and Carr, drinking in Benson's billiard room. Carr is a swinish rogue with a gambling problem and loads of debt, and he has decided to blackmail Benson – by threatening to reveal his sexual indiscretions to his fiancée, Olive – if he doesn't pay off his debts. Benson fumes with rage and closes the door. Weeks later – and with no sight or sound from Carr, who has disappeared – he and Olive are strolling through the

local park when she chooses to head over to a secluded well hidden among dark pines, which she considers romantic. Benson, however, is miserably uncomfortable by the well, which he considers unhealthy and sinister. They talk sweet-nothings at the edge, but a horrible twist of fate causes Olive's antique bracelet to be knocked off and down the black mouth. Benson is terrified by her suggestion that they get help in the morning and have it recovered, and he assures her that he will do it himself. Clearly, Benson wants the well left alone, so later that night, he and two of his servants come to the well with rope and a light, and Benson plunges into the hole to recover it. However, something goes horribly wrong: the servants hear a hideous scream and quickly pull on the rope to recover him, noticing that the weight seems to have doubled. Finally, they hoist him over the edge: "A long pull and a strong pull, and the face of a dead man with mud in the eyes and nostrils came peering over the edge. Behind it was the ghastly face of his master; but this he saw too late." In terror they accidentally drop the rope, and the two corpses – wrapped in one another's arms – plunge to the bottom.

Crawford's story is similar: it involves two brothers in love with the same girl who are sailors on the same ship. One of them mysteriously falls overboard, and the other comes home to marry the girl, uninhibited. However, the threesome is not over: walking home from the wedding, they are observed by some onlookers who see two men on either side of one woman, and one dressed in oilskins (a sailor's rubber raincoat, trousers, and hat). When the trio arrives at the honeymooner's cottage door, suddenly they seem to notice one another: the wife shrieks in mortal dread (according to the witness, like a man he once heard "when his arm was taken off by a steam-crane"), and the husband crumples into his brother's clutches, as the pair march off to the crashing sea, nearby, where they disappear under the black waters. The narrator notes that the wife went temporarily mad and barely recovered her sanity, and as to the brothers: "Oh, you want to know if they found Jack's body? I don't know whether it was his, but I read in a paper at a Southern port where I was with my new ship that two dead bodies had come ashore in a gale down East, in pretty bad shape. They were locked together, and one was a skeleton in oilskins."

III.

So back to James' rendition of this trope. The details are unimportant because he is experimenting with a different type of story: unlike Jacobs or Crawford who focus on the ghost's direct influence on the subject of the haunting, James' focus is how witnessing the haunting effects the students who witness it. He leaves the background between Sampson and his visitant realistically unexplained – as though it really was a veridical ghost story and not a literary one. Genuinely reported ghost stories have loose ends, unanswered questions, and vague impressions, while literary ghost stories are supposed to relay a moral or an artistic statement. James manages to make an artistic statement – that the most authentic frights in life are usually the least explainable – while mimicking the

style of the sorts of veridical ghost stories that a boy might expect to hear in a private school. As far as the implications of the story, a cross-referencing of the two previously referenced stories should provide a general if not specific answer: the victim is likely a person who stood in Sampson's way, whom he murdered and hid in the Irish well. Sampson was a humble-living bachelor, so competitive love and financially-motivated blackmail are unlikely motives – unlike Jacobs' and Crawford's villains – but even a humble-living bachelor can have reasons to kill. His travels add to the air of mystery in his life, and his fanciful stories suggest that he could be a bit more than he seems – a simple tutor. Whatever the corpse in the well threatened him with – whether as a clingy homosexual lover (as many have suggested), a partner in his scholarship of dark, ancient studies, or as an academic rival – it is clear that Sampson's past eventually caught up with him. Whether he was physically dragged to the well in Ireland by a walking corpse (as in Crawford) or taunted and lured there in a hopes of further overing up a crime which seemed increasingly likely to be exposed (as in Jacobs), Sampson is yet another tormented murderer who ends up inseparably linked to the worst thing that he has ever done – enfolded in a ghoulishly loving embrace with the corpse of his victim.

*BETWEEN 1921 and 1924, over 1,500 craftsmen plied away at what would ultimately become the greatest, most intricate dollhouse in the world. Commissioned for Queen Mary – consort to George V and grandmother of Queen Elizabeth – it featured working electricity, hot and cold water, a garage with seven model cars and a motorbike, over 1,000 miniature paintings, and operable elevators. It was a 1:12 scale model of a royal townhouse with a Georgian façade and an English garden designed by Gertrude Jekyll. The attention to detail was astronomical: each room was fully furnished and its contents were made from real materials (the silver is silver; the porcelain is porcelain; the furniture is upholstered) by expert craftsmen who ordinarily made these articles in life-size. Medicine chests, tea services, crown jewels, and toilet paper are all included in the painstaking work. Even the library included 588 1:12 books, some of which were literary classics (including the Koran and Shakespeare), while others were specially written – with the text included in the tiny pages – for the occasion. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle famously contributed the tongue-in-cheek Holmes story, “How Watson Learned the Trick,” while A. A. Milne, J. M. Barrie, Thomas Hardy, and Rudyard Kipling provided their own stories (George Bernard Shaw, on the other hand, refused to play along). By 1924 M. R. James had become a celebrated writer of first-rate ghost stories – his two greatest anthologies, *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* and *More Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* were published in 1904 and 1911, respectively – and was asked to create an original supernatural story. It was his idea to set it in a dollhouse.*

The Haunted Dolls’ House
{1923}

"I suppose you get stuff of that kind through your hands pretty often?" said Mr. Dillet, as he pointed with his stick to an object which shall be described when the time comes: and when he said it, he lied in his throat, and knew that he lied. Not once in twenty years—perhaps not once in a lifetime—could Mr. Chittenden, skilled as he was in ferreting out the forgotten treasures of half a dozen counties, expect to handle such a specimen. It was collectors' palaver¹¹, and Mr. Chittenden recognized it as such.

"Stuff of that kind, Mr. Dillet! It's a museum piece, that is."

"Well, I suppose there are museums that'll take anything."

"I've seen one, not as good as that, years back," said Mr. Chittenden thoughtfully. "But that's not likely to come into the market: and I'm told they

¹¹ Jabber; unproductive, formal conversation

'ave some fine ones of the period over the water¹². No: I'm only telling you the truth, Mr. Dillet, when I was to say that if you was to place an unlimited order with me for the very best that could be got—and you know I 'ave facilities for getting to know of such things, and a reputation to maintain—well, all I can say is, I should lead you straight up to that one and say, 'I can't do no better for you than that, sir.'"

"Hear, hear!" said Mr. Dillet, applauding ironically with the end of his stick on the floor of the shop. "How much are you sticking the innocent American buyer for it, eh?"

"Oh, I shan't be over hard on the buyer, American or otherwise. You see, it stands this way, Mr. Dillet—if I knew just a bit more about the pedigree¹³—"

"Or just a bit less," Mr. Dillet put in.

"Ha, ha! you will have your joke, sir. No, but as I was saying, if I knew just a little more than what I do about the piece—though anyone can see for themselves it's a genuine thing, every last corner of it, and there's not been one of my men allowed to so much as touch it since it came into the shop—there'd be another figure in the price I'm asking."

"And what's that: five and twenty¹⁴?"

"Multiply that by three and you've got it, sir. Seventy-five's¹⁵ my price."

"And fifty's mine," said Mr. Dillet. The point of agreement was, of course, somewhere between the two, it does not matter exactly where—I think sixty guineas¹⁶. But half an hour later the object was being packed, and within an hour Mr. Dillet had called for it in his car and driven away. Mr. Chittenden, holding the cheque in his hand, saw him off from the door with smiles, and returned, still smiling, into the parlour where his wife was making the tea. He stopped at the door.

"It's gone," he said. "Thank God for that!" said Mrs. Chittenden, putting down the teapot. "Mr. Dillet, was it?"

"Yes, it was."

"Well, I'd sooner it was him than another." "Oh, I don't know; he ain't a bad feller, my dear."

"Maybe not, but in my opinion he'd be none the worse for a bit of a shake up."

¹² In the United States

¹³ The personal history of the piece: who designed it, when, why, where, etc.

¹⁴ £25 in 1923 would be worth roughly \$2,000 in 2021

¹⁵ \$6,000 in 2021 currency

¹⁶ £63 – a guinea is a gold coin worth one pound and one shilling (it essentially has a built-in tip) typically used for paying for a professional service (purchasing a suit from a tailor, a necklace from a jeweler, or the services of a doctor or lawyer). Sixty guineas, then, are worth sixty pounds and sixty shillings (three pounds)

"Well, if that's your opinion, it's my opinion he's put himself into the way of getting one. Anyhow, we shan't have no more of it, and that's something to be thankful for." And so Mr. and Mrs. Chittenden sat down to tea.

And what of Mr. Dillet and his new acquisition? What it was, the title of this story will have told you. What it was like, I shall have to indicate as well as I can.

There was only just enough room for it in the car, and Mr. Dillet had to sit with the driver: he had also to go slow, for though the rooms of the Dolls' House had all been stuffed carefully with soft cottonwool, jolting was to be avoided, in view of the immense number of small objects which thronged them; and the ten-mile drive was an anxious time for him, in spite of all the precautions he insisted upon. At last his front door was reached, and Collins, the butler, came out.

"Look here, Collins, you must help me with this thing—it's a delicate job. We must get it out upright, see? It's full of little things that mustn't be displaced more than we can help. Let's see, where shall we have it? (After a pause for consideration.) Really, I think I shall have to put it in my own room, to begin with at any rate. On the big table—that's it."

It was conveyed—with much talking—to Mr. Dillet's spacious room on the first floor, looking out on the drive. The sheeting was unwound from it, and the front thrown open, and for the next hour or two Mr. Dillet was fully occupied in extracting the padding and setting in order the contents of the rooms.

When this thoroughly congenial task was finished, I must say that it would have been difficult to find a more perfect and attractive specimen of a Dolls' House in Strawberry Hill Gothic¹⁷ than that which now stood on Mr. Dillet's large kneehole¹⁸ table, lighted up by the evening sun which came slanting through three tall slash-windows.

It was quite six feet long, including the Chapel or Oratory which flanked the front on the left as you faced it, and the stable on the right. The main block of the house was, as I have said, in the Gothic manner: that is to say, the windows had pointed arches and were surmounted by what are called ogival hoods¹⁹, with crockets and finials²⁰ such as we see on the canopies of tombs built into church

¹⁷ Strawberry Hill House was a Gothic revival villa built and designed by English politician, writer, and historian, Horace Walpole, in 1749, and was constantly expanded on and renovated throughout his lifetime. Walpole used it to display his extensive collection of antiquarian objects, and tried to reflect the interior by giving the exterior a Gothic façade of turrets, battlements, and crenelated towers

¹⁸ A large office desk with drawers on two sides, with room for a sitter's knees in between

¹⁹ Extended, stonework borders around the top of a pointed, Gothic window

²⁰ Crockets are small, carved, stone ornaments – usually in the form of a curled leaf, sprouting bud, or flower – that are arranged along the edge of a Gothic feature (usually

walls. At the angles were absurd²¹ turrets covered with arched panels. The Chapel had pinnacles and buttresses²², and a bell in the turret and coloured glass in the windows. When the front of the house was open you saw four large rooms, bedroom, dining-room, drawing-room and kitchen, each with its appropriate furniture in a very complete state.

The stable on the right was in two storeys, with its proper complement of horses, coaches and grooms, and with its clock and Gothic cupola²³ for the clock bell.

Pages, of course, might be written on the outfit of the mansion—how many frying-pans, how many gilt chairs, what pictures, carpets, chandeliers, four-posters, table linen, glass, crockery and plate it possessed; but all this must be left to the imagination. I will only say that the base or plinth on which the house stood (for it was fitted with one of some depth which allowed of a flight of steps to the front door and a terrace, partly balustraded) contained a shallow drawer or drawers in which were neatly stored sets of embroidered curtains, changes of raiment²⁴ for the inmates, and, in short, all the materials for an infinite series of variations and refittings of the most absorbing and delightful kind.

"Quintessence of Horace Walpole, that's what it is: he must have had something to do with the making of it." Such was Mr. Dillet's murmured reflection as he knelt before it in a reverent ecstasy. "Simply wonderful! this is my day and no mistake. Five hundred pounds²⁵ coming in this morning for that cabinet which I never cared about, and now this tumbling into my hands for a tenth, at the very most, of what it would fetch in town²⁶. Well, well! It almost makes one afraid something'll happen to counter it. Let's have a look at the population, anyhow."

along the edges of a spire or tower); finials are ornaments that rest on the top of a post or pillar (in the world of flags, these are often polished balls, spearheads, or eagles) which – in Gothic architecture – usually take the form of long, tapered points, the edges of which are often ornamented with crockets

²¹ Absurd, in that they are clearly purposeless and only for show. As a great lover of Medieval architecture, James resented the Gothic Revival as being a cheap bastardization of a classic style, rather in the way that mid-century American homes labelled "neo-colonial" are little more than ranch houses with some cheap-looking pillars and porticos thrown on them to give them the absolute minimal features necessary to half-heartedly connect them to the colonial style popularized during the 18th century

²² Projecting stone arches used to stabilize towers and other tall structures

²³ A small, dome-like projection on the top of a roof which was traditionally used either as a source of ventilation or as a bell tower

²⁴ Clothes

²⁵ About \$39,000

²⁶ That is, London

Accordingly, he set them before him in a row. Again, here is an opportunity, which some would snatch at, of making an inventory of costume: I am incapable of it.

There were a gentleman and lady, in blue satin and brocade²⁷ respectively. There were two children, a boy and a girl. There was a cook, a nurse, a footman, and there were the stable servants, two postilions, a coachman, two grooms²⁸.

"Anyone else? Yes, possibly."

The curtains of the four-poster in the bedroom were closely drawn round all four sides of it, and he put his finger in between them and felt in the bed. He drew the finger back hastily, for it almost seemed to him as if something had—not stirred, perhaps, but yielded—in an odd live way as he pressed it. Then he put back the curtains, which ran on rods in the proper manner, and extracted from the bed a white-haired old gentleman in a long linen night-dress and cap, and laid him down by the rest. The tale was complete.

Dinner-time was now near, so Mr. Dillet spent but five minutes in putting the lady and children into the drawing-room, the gentleman into the dining-room, the servants into the kitchen and stables, and the old man back into his bed. He retired into his dressing-room next door, and we see and hear no more of him until something like eleven o'clock at night.

His whim was to sleep surrounded by some of the gems of his collection. The big room in which we have seen him contained his bed: bath, wardrobe, and all the appliances of dressing were in a commodious room adjoining: but his four-poster, which itself was a valued treasure, stood in the large room where he sometimes wrote, and often sat, and even received visitors. To-night he repaired to it in a highly complacent frame of mind.

There was no striking clock within earshot—none on the staircase, none in the stable, none in the distant church tower. Yet it is indubitable that Mr. Dillet was started out of a very pleasant slumber by a bell tolling One.

He was so much startled that he did not merely lie breathless with wide-open eyes, but actually sat up in his bed.

He never asked himself, till the morning hours, how it was that, though there was no light at all in the room, the Dolls' House on the knee-hole table stood out with complete clearness. But it was so. The effect was that of a bright harvest moon shining full on the front of a big white stone mansion—a quarter of a mile away it might be, and yet every detail was photographically sharp. There were trees about it, too—trees rising behind the chapel and the house. He

²⁷ Fabric, usually silk, richly embroidered with gold or silver thread

²⁸ Nursemaids cared for and watched young children; footmen waited on the family and their guests during dinner, admitted guests into the home, and conveyed messages and letters to their master; postillions assist with the carriage and help guide the coach by riding on one of the lead horses; grooms tended to the cleaning of the stables and upkeep of the horses



seemed to be conscious of the scent of a cool still September night. He thought he could hear an occasional stamp and clink from the stables, as of horses stirring. And with another shock he realized that, above the house, he was looking, not at the wall of his room with its pictures, but into the profound blue of a night sky.

There were lights, more than one, in the windows, and he quickly saw that this was no four-roomed house with a movable front, but one of many rooms and staircases—a real house, but seen as if through the wrong end of a telescope.

"You mean to show me something," he muttered to himself, and he gazed earnestly on the lighted windows. They would in real life have been shuttered or curtained, no doubt, he thought; but, as it was, there was nothing to intercept his view of what was being transacted inside the rooms.

Two rooms were lighted—one on the ground floor to the right of the door, one upstairs, on the left—the first brightly enough, the other rather dimly. The lower room was the dining-room: a table was laid, but the meal was over, and

small thing from him and hurried out of the room. He, too, disappeared, but only for a moment or two. The front door slowly opened and he stepped out and only wine and glasses were left on the table. The man of the blue satin and the woman of the brocade were alone in the room, and they were talking very earnestly, seated close together at the table, their elbows on it: every now and again stopping to listen, as it seemed.. Once he rose, came to the window and opened it and put his head out and his hand to his ear. There was a lighted taper in a silver candlestick on a sideboard. When the man left the window he seemed to leave the room also; and the lady, taper in hand, remained standing and listening. The expression on her face was that of one striving her utmost to keep down a fear that threatened to master her—and succeeding. It was a hateful face, too; broad, flat and sly. Now the man came back and she took some stood on the top of the perron, looking this way and that; then turned towards the upper window that was lighted, and shook his fist²⁹.

It was time to look at that upper window. Through it was seen a four-post bed: a nurse or other servant in an arm-chair, evidently sound asleep; in the bed an old man lying: awake, and, one would say, anxious, from the way in which he shifted about and moved his fingers, beating tunes on the coverlet. Beyond the bed a door opened. Light was seen on the ceiling, and the lady came in: she set down her candle on a table, came to the fireside and roused the nurse. In her

²⁹ It has been noted by several commentators that the figures in Dillet's vision silently act out their emotions and actions in an exaggerated, pantomime manner that reflects the style of silent movies which were, of course, all the rage in 1923. Although James didn't appear to be a massive movie buff, he certainly had seen them and was obviously inspired by them in his description of the doll's house's haunting

hand she had an old-fashioned wine bottle, ready uncorked³⁰. The nurse took it, poured some of the contents into a little silver saucepan, added some spice and sugar from casters on the table, and set it to warm on the fire. Meanwhile the old man in the bed beckoned feebly to the lady, who came to him, smiling, took his wrist as if to feel his pulse, and bit her lip as if in consternation. He looked at her anxiously, and then pointed to the window, and spoke. She nodded, and did as the man below had done; opened the casement and listened—perhaps rather ostentatiously: then drew in her head and shook it, looking at the old man, who seemed to sigh.

By this time the posset on the fire was steaming, and the nurse poured it into a small two-handled silver bowl and brought it to the bedside. The old man seemed disinclined for it and was waving it away, but the lady and the nurse together bent over him and evidently pressed it upon him. He must have yielded, for they supported him into a sitting position, and put it to his lips. He drank most of it, in several draughts, and they laid him down. The lady left the room, smiling good night to him, and took the bowl, the bottle and the silver saucepan with her. The nurse returned to the chair, and there was an interval of complete quiet.

Suddenly the old man started up in his bed—and he must have uttered some cry, for the nurse started out of her chair and made but one step of it to the bedside. He was a sad and terrible sight—flushed in the face, almost to blackness, the eyes glaring whitely, both hands clutching at his heart, foam at his lips³¹. For a moment the nurse left him, ran to the door, flung it wide open, and, one supposes, screamed aloud for help, then darted back to the bed and seemed to try feverishly to soothe him—to lay him down—anything. But as the lady, her husband, and several servants, rushed into the room with horrified faces, the old man collapsed under the nurse's hands and lay back, and his features, contorted with agony and rage, relaxed slowly into calm.

A few moments later, lights showed out to the left of the house, and a coach with flambeaux³² drove up to the door. A white-wigged man in black got nimbly out and ran up the steps, carrying a small leather trunk-shaped box. He was met in the doorway by the man and his wife, she with her handkerchief clutched between her hands, he with a tragic face, but retaining his self-control. They led the new-comer into the dining-room, where he set his box of papers on the

³⁰ It is important to note that the bottle was already uncorked: there is the distinct possibility that something was slipped into it before it was brought into the room

³¹ These symptoms may suggest cyanide poisoning. Also known as prussic acid, this poison tastes bitter and would require some sort of strong-tasting medium – like spiced wine – to cover it's flavor. It kills by asphyxiation, as it shuts down the respiratory cells, causing the victim to exhibit a cherry-red face that darkens into purple as they are deprived of oxygen

³² Torches

table, and, turning to them, listened with a face of consternation at what they had to tell. He nodded his head again and again, threw out his hands slightly, declined, it seemed, offers of refreshment and lodging for the night, and within a few minutes came slowly down the steps, entering the coach and driving off the way he had come. As the man in blue watched him from the top of the steps, a smile not pleasant to see stole slowly over his fat white face. Darkness fell over the whole scene³³ as the lights of the coach disappeared.

But Mr. Dillet remained sitting up in the bed: he had rightly guessed that there would be a sequel. The house front glimmered out again before long. But now there was a difference. The lights were in other windows, one at the top of the house, the other illuminating the range of coloured windows of the chapel. How he saw through these is not quite obvious, but he did. The interior was as carefully furnished as the rest of the establishment, with its minute red cushions on the desks, its Gothic stall-canopies, and its western gallery and pinnaced organ with gold pipes. On the centre of the black and white pavement was a bier³⁴: four tall candles burned at the corners. On the bier was a coffin covered with a pall of black velvet.

As he looked the folds of the pall stirred. It seemed to rise at one end: it slid downwards: it fell away, exposing the black coffin with its silver handles and name-plate. One of the tall candlesticks swayed and toppled over. Ask no more, but turn, as Mr. Dillet hastily did, and look in at the lighted window at the top of the house, where a boy and girl lay in two truckle-beds³⁵, and a four-poster for the nurse rose above them. The nurse was not visible for the moment; but the father and mother were there, dressed now in mourning, but with very little sign of mourning in their demeanour. Indeed, they were laughing and talking with a good deal of animation, sometimes to each other, and sometimes throwing a remark to one or other of the children, and again laughing at the answers. Then the father was seen to go on tiptoe out of the room, taking with him as he went a white garment that hung on a peg near the door. He shut the door after him. A minute or two later it was slowly opened again, and a muffled head poked round it. A bent form of sinister shape stepped across to the truckle-beds, and suddenly stopped, threw up its arms and revealed, of course, the father, laughing. The children were in agonies of terror, the boy with the bedclothes over his head, the girl throwing herself out of bed into her mother's arms. Attempts at consolation followed—the parents took the children on their laps, patted them, picked up the white gown and showed there was no harm in it, and so forth; and at last putting the children back into bed, left the room with

³³ James borrows the “fade-to-black” transitional effect from the moving pictures

³⁴ A movable frame on which the coffin is rested to lie in state before burial

³⁵ Also called “trundle” beds: low-lying beds, usually for children, which can be rolled under a larger bed when not in use to make more space

encouraging waves of the hand. As they left it, the nurse came in, and soon the light died down.

Still Mr. Dillet watched immovable.

A new sort of light—not of lamp or candle—a pale ugly light³⁶, began to dawn around the door-case at the back of the room. The door was opening again. The seer does not like to dwell upon what he saw entering the room: he says it might be described as a frog—the size of a man—but it had scanty white hair about its head³⁷. It was busy about the truckle-beds, but not for long³⁸. The sound of cries—faint, as if coming out of a vast distance—but, even so, infinitely appalling, reached the ear.

³⁶ Implied to be the phosphorescent glow of decomposition. Rotting food (seafood in particular, but rodents, meat, and even corpses as well) have been known to emit a blue-green phosphorescence. The color of phosphorescent bacteria is a bright, neon blue that peppers the stinking meat in question in pockets, streaks, and veins. This is no cute, clichéd ghostly glow: by comparing it to a rotten lobster in a creepy cellar, James is directly suggesting a corpse in the beginning stages of decay, when its rotting flesh is swarming with radiating putrescence – a real occurrence that happens to many bodies after burial called postmortem luminescence. In the age of embalming we never see this in human corpses, but bodies have been discovered by their dull glow, and neglected battlefields have been known to sparkle with blue light if the bodies were left unburied for more than a few weeks, as postmortem luminescence flickers over the blackening faces

³⁷ There have been a few popular theories as to who or what exactly this frog-man is: is it a vengeful revenant as in “The Mezzotint,” “Number 13,” and “A School Story,” or mutant demons as in “Abbot Thomas,” “Count Magnus,” and “The Ash-Tree”? I lean strongly in the direction of the former for a variety of reasons: the grandfather has absolutely no suggestion of being a warlock (unlike Thomas, Magnus, or Mothersole), and with the obvious parallels between this story and “The Mezzotint,” there’s no real reason to doubt that the attacking figure is not the reanimated corpse of the murdered grandfather. The strongest evidence is in the disruption of the coffin – when the lid rises, Dracula-like – and the detail of the frog-man’s scanty, white hair. I believe that many readers have over emphasized the wording of “frog-man,” taking it to mean a literal mutant as opposed to a slimey, decomposing corpse moving about in a crouching posture

³⁸ This could either be read in terms of “Oh, Whistle” – the grandfather frightens the children to death simply by waking the children up and shoving his hideous face into theirs – “The Ash-Tree” – the grandfather vampirically drains their blood – or “A Warning to the Curious” – the grandfather physically throttles or bashes his grandchildren to death. In either case, he does not – as in “The Mezzotint” – mysteriously abscond with them: we have their corpses as evidence of his brutal intentions

There were signs of a hideous commotion all over the house: lights moved along and up, and doors opened and shut, and running figures passed within the windows. The clock in the stable turret tolled one, and darkness fell again.

It was only dispelled once more, to show the house front. At the bottom of the steps dark figures were drawn up in two lines, holding flaming torches. More dark figures came down the steps, bearing, first one, then another small coffin. And the lines of torch-bearers with the coffins between them moved silently onward to the left.

The hours of night passed on—never so slowly, Mr. Dillet thought. Gradually he sank down from sitting to lying in his bed—but he did not close an eye: and early next morning he sent for the doctor.

The doctor found him in a disquieting state of nerves, and recommended sea-air. To a quiet place on the East Coast he accordingly repaired by easy stages in his car.

One of the first people he met on the sea front was Mr. Chittenden, who, it appeared, had likewise been advised to take his wife away for a bit of a change.

Mr. Chittenden looked somewhat askance upon him when they met: and not without cause.

"Well, I don't wonder at you being a bit upset, Mr. Dillet. What? yes, well, I might say 'orrible upset, to be sure, seeing what me and my poor wife went through ourselves. But I put it to you, Mr. Dillet, one of two things: was I going to scrap a lovely piece like that on the one 'and, or was I going to tell customers: 'I'm selling you a regular picture-palace³⁹-dramar in reel life of the olden time, billed to perform regular at one o'clock a.m.'? Why, what would you 'ave said yourself? And next thing you know, two Justices of the Peace in the back parlour, and pore Mr. and Mrs. Chittenden off in a spring cart⁴⁰ to the County Asylum and everyone in the street saying, 'Ah, I thought it 'ud come to that. Look at the way the man drank!'—and me next door, or next door but one, to a total abstainer⁴¹, as you know. Well, there was my position. What? Me 'ave it back in the shop? Well, what do you think? No, but I'll tell you what I will do. You shall have your money back, bar the ten pound⁴² I paid for it, and you make what you can."

Later in the day, in what is offensively called the "smoke-room" of the hotel, a murmured conversation between the two went on for some time.

"How much do you really know about that thing, and where it came from?"

³⁹ Movie theater

⁴⁰ A light, horse-driven cart known for its speed (James is likely using this to mean "on the fast track to the asylum" rather than literally)

⁴¹ "and me being basically – or *next-to-basically* – a complete teetotaler"

⁴² \$580 or so in 2021 (recall that Dillot had paid £63 for the same piece)

"Honest, Mr. Dillet, I don't know the 'ouse. Of course, it came out of the lumber room⁴³ of a country 'ouse—that anyone could guess. But I'll go as far as say this, that I believe it's not a hundred miles from this place. Which direction and how far I've no notion. I'm only judging by guess-work. The man as I actually paid the cheque to ain't one of my regular men, and I've lost sight of him; but I 'ave the idea that this part of the country was his beat, and that's every word I can tell you. But now, Mr. Dillet, there's one thing that rather physicks⁴⁴ me. That old chap—I suppose you saw him drive up to the door—I thought so: now, would he have been the medical man, do you take it? My wife would have it so, but I stuck to it that was the lawyer, because he had papers with him, and one he took out was folded up."

"I agree," said Mr. Dillet. "Thinking it over, I came to the conclusion that was the old man's will, ready to be signed."

"Just what I thought," said Mr. Chittenden, "and I took it that will would have cut out the young people, eh? Well, well! It's been a lesson to me, I know that. I shan't buy no more dolls' houses, nor waste no more money on the pictures⁴⁵—and as to this business of poisonin' grandpa, well, if I know myself, I never 'ad much of a turn for that⁴⁶. Live and let live: that's bin my motto throughout life, and I ain't found it a bad one."

Filled with these elevated sentiments, Mr. Chittenden retired to his lodgings. Mr. Dillet next day repaired to the local Institute⁴⁷, where he hoped to find some clue to the riddle that absorbed him. He gazed in despair at a long file of the Canterbury and York Society's publications of the Parish Registers of the District. No print resembling the house of his nightmare was among those that hung on the staircase and in the passages. Disconsolate, he found himself at last in a derelict room, staring at a dusty model of a church in a dusty glass case: *Model of St. Stephen's Church, Coxham. Presented by J. Merewether, Esq., of Ilbridge House, 1877*. The work of his ancestor James Merewether, d.. 1786. There was something in the fashion of it that reminded him dimly of his horror. He retraced his steps to a wall map he had noticed, and made out that Ilbridge House was in Coxham Parish⁴⁸. Coxham was, as it happened, one of the parishes of which he had retained the name when he glanced over the file of printed registers, and it was not long before he found in them the record of the burial of

⁴³ A large store room where un-used furniture was kept until the situation (e.g. a party) required it to be brought out

⁴⁴ Troubles, upsets

⁴⁵ That is, the cinema

⁴⁶ "If I know myself, I never had a taste for that kind of thing" – James is humorously having Chittenden politely voice his disapproval for murder with the same seriousness that you might speak about gardening, running for political office, or dating a friend's ex

⁴⁷ Historical society

⁴⁸ Fictitious

Roger Milford, aged 76, on the 11th of September, 1757, and of Roger and Elizabeth Merewether, aged 9 and 7, on the 19th of the same month. It seemed worth while to follow up this clue, frail as it was; and in the afternoon he drove out to Coxham. The east end of the north aisle of the church is a Milford chapel, and on its north wall are tablets to the same persons; Roger, the elder, it seems, was distinguished by all the qualities which adorn "the Father, the Magistrate"⁴⁹ and the Man": the memorial was erected by his attached daughter Elizabeth, "who did not long survive the loss of a parent ever solicitous for her welfare, and of two amiable children." The last sentence was plainly an addition to the original inscription.

A yet later slab told of James Merewether, husband of Elizabeth, "who in the dawn of life practised, not without success, those arts which, had he continued their exercise, might in the opinion of the most competent judges have earned for him the name of the British Vitruvius"⁵⁰: but who, overwhelmed by the visitation which deprived him of an affectionate partner and a blooming offspring, passed his Prime and Age in a secluded yet elegant Retirement: his grateful Nephew and Heir indulges a pious sorrow by this too brief recital of his excellences."

The children were more simply commemorated. Both died on the night of the 12th of September.

Mr. Dillet felt sure that in Ilbridge House he had found the scene of his drama. In some old sketchbook, possibly in some old print, he may yet find convincing evidence that he is right. But the Ilbridge House of today is not that which he sought; it is an Elizabethan erection of the forties⁵¹, in red brick with stone quoins⁵² and dressings. A quarter of a mile from it, in a low part of the park, backed by ancient, staghorned, ivy-strangled trees and thick undergrowth, are marks of a terraced platform overgrown with rough grass. A few stone balusters lie here and there, and a heap or two, covered with nettles and ivy, of wrought stones with badly-carved crockets. This, someone told Mr. Dillet, was the site of an older house.

⁴⁹ The fact that Roger was a judge – a man of justice – does help color in his personality a bit, and may help explain his particularly cruel, eye-for-an-eye revenge

⁵⁰ Clearly James' attempt at mocking the Gothic revivalists, whom he saw as ludicrously self-important and grandiose: Vitruvius was a first century Roman architect, considered the father of architecture as an academic science (Da Vinci named his "Vitruvian Man" after him to suggest a man who is broken down into his perfect, idealized proportions)

⁵¹ Thus the 1750s bastardization of the Gothic style is suitably erased by an 1840s bastardization of the Elizabethan style – James' idea of a suitable fate

⁵² The outside angle of a wall, made up of stone blocks while the rest of the wall is made of brick

As he drove out of the village, the hall clock struck four, and Mr. Dillet started up and clapped his hands to his ears. It was not the first time he had heard that bell.

Awaiting an offer from the other side of the Atlantic, the dolls' house still reposes, carefully sheeted, in a loft over Mr. Dillet's stables, whither Collins conveyed it on the day when Mr. Dillet started for the sea coast.

ALTHOUGH it has often been considered a bit of a puzzler, "The Haunted Dolls' House" remains among James' most memorable, most anthologized works. Notoriously, he was very uncomfortable with the result: in an odd coda (omitted here for editorial reasons) he shamefacedly admits to his readers that he has basically upcycled the plot of "The Mezzotint." While this is undeniably true, it is also fair to say that the story was stronger, in some regards, to "The Mezzotint." Notably, it shows the influence of the increasingly popular silent cinema: the exaggerated pantomime of the ghosts is undeniably lifted from the expressive style of film that began with the Gothic dramas and science fiction fantasies of Georges Méliès and was currently at its zenith in the hands of Fritz Lang, F. W. Murnau, and a young Alfred Hitchcock. Silent film masterpieces of horror like The Phantom of the Opera, Häxan: Witchcraft through the Ages, The Phantom Carriage, The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, Nosferatu, The Fall of the House of Usher and The Golem, all had a tendency to foster a strangely Jamesian quality in the way they told little but suggested much: the actual horror is deftly hinted at, but the Expressionistic atmosphere – billowing gently like a wispy fog bank – tells us more than the title cards: we sense the wrongness and depravity without having to have it explained to us. Such is the nature – whether it is obnoxious to the reader or not – of this story. There is no supernatural hook or mechanism here, so far as we can tell: unlike most of James' stories, there isn't a suggestion of alchemy or black magic or conjuring. It appears to be more in the line of it's predecessor, "The Mezzotint," and tales such as "The Story of a Disappearance and an Appearance," "Martin's Close," and "A Warning to the Curious" where the only apparent vehicle for the murdered person's reappearance is their lingering emotions -- usually rage (Mezz., Dis/App), obsession (MC), or a sense of duty (WttC). Indeed, as in "Disappearance/Appearance," the dead man is an elderly man of authority with a taste for Old Testament justice (a clergyman with a reputation as a strict disciplinarian in that story, and a bitter old magistrate who doesn't think twice about disinheriting his daughter and her husband in this one). The greatest mystery tends to be the nature, motives, and methods of the luminous "frog-man" who steals into the nursery with the aim of snuffing out the family line.

FOR M. R. James, who began his career as a writer of ghost stories by reading them to his friends at Christmas parties, his last great ghost story was written, fittingly, to be publicly read in front of a specific audience. It is a campfire legend, composed for a troop of Eton Boy Scouts who were camped on the rolling downs near Warbarrow Bay in Dorset, and was read to them on the evening of July 27th, 1927. In a letter he described the pitch which he was offered: "Tomorrow it is proposed that the Lower Master takes me by car to Worbarrow Bay in Dorset where the Scouts are in camp - it is further proposed that by the camp fire I should read them a story of a terrible nature, which I have made - contrary to my expectation." As reported in his obituary, the tale was a terrific success: "several boys had a somewhat disturbed night, as the scene of the story was quite close to Camp." It shares a great deal with another story written for boys: "A School Story," intended to be read to the lads of the King's College choir, which also involves a group of pre-teen students who witness the assault of an acquaintance by a skeletal predator, and also involves a dimly-suggested backstory which has been the result of much speculation and curiosity. However, there is a significant shift in the victim's station (one that, perhaps, reflects the difference in James' age between the two stories): in the earlier one, he was a charismatic Latin master, whose abduction is partially witnessed by his students, while sixteen years later he wrote the victim as a petulant boy whose beastly nature is far from that of the hapless saplings in "Lost Hearts," "The Mezzotint," or "Haunted Dolls' House," and has far more in common with the worldly Saul in "The Residence of Whitminster."

II.

At any rate, the story begins – as "A School Story" does – in a fairly dry, nostalgic manner, reveling in inside jokes and niche references which may have tickled the Scouts at Warbarrow Bay, but may disarm the modern reader who wants to get to the ghouls and skip over the storied career of its protagonist, Stanley Judkins. However, it is the hinge between the two halves of this story – beginning with the satirical description of the rivalry between the boorish vulgarian, Judkins, and the impossibly perfect Arthur Wilcox – that makes this James' last true masterpiece. He seamlessly rolls from a somewhat tedious – if lightly comical – description of Scouting at Eton before we find ourselves in a very, very different story: one of James' most shivery, with one of his most effective and controlled climaxes. It is short, un-philosophical, and fantastically satisfying, with an almost obsessive attention to controlling the plot and discarding any unnecessary details. In short, the perfect campfire story. James clearly designed it with great relish, knowing that it would both scintillate and haunt the squirming Scouts – who knew all too well where Wailing Well lurks – just beyond the downs where they were sleeping that night, obscured in tall grass, gathered in gloom, and close enough that its ghastly denizens wouldn't have far to walk to gain the camp.

Wailing Well
{1928}

IN the year 19— there were two members of the Troop of Scouts⁵³ attached to a famous school⁵⁴, named respectively Arthur Wilcox and Stanley Judkins. They were the same age, boarded in the same house, were in the same division, and naturally were members of the same patrol⁵⁵. They were so much alike in appearance as to cause anxiety and trouble, and even irritation, to the masters who came in contact with them. But oh how different were they in their inward man, or boy!

It was to Arthur Wilcox that the Head Master⁵⁶ said, looking up with a smile as the boy entered chambers, "Why, Wilcox, there will be a deficit in the prize fund if you stay here much longer! Here, take this handsomely bound copy of the *Life and Works of Bishop Ken*⁵⁷, and with it my hearty congratulations to yourself and your excellent parents." It was Wilcox again, whom the Provost⁵⁸ noticed as he passed through the playing fields, and, pausing for a moment, observed to the Vice-Provost⁵⁹, "That lad has a remarkable brow!" "Indeed, yes," said the Vice-Provost. "It denotes either genius or water on the brain."

⁵³ The Scouting Movement was founded in 1908 by British Army Lt. General Robert Baden-Powell, following the publication of his book *Scouting for Boys*, a treatise on training young people in ranging off the land, outdoor living and survival, citizenship, and self-improvement. Today Scouts are still members of voluntary, non-political organizations for young people which educate them in the basics of Baden-Powell's movement, along with more artistic and academic pursuits, such as crafts, coding, history, math, art, and music. As described on Wikipedia's page for the movement, the purpose of Scouting is "to contribute to the development of young people in achieving their full physical, intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual potentials as individuals, as responsible citizens and as members of their local, national and international communities"

⁵⁴ Eton College

⁵⁵ A unit of six to eight Scouts

⁵⁶ Cyril Alington

⁵⁷ Thomas Ken was a 17th century Anglican bishop who was tried for sedition and removed from his post for refusing to pledge allegiance to King William and Queen Mary after the Glorious Revolution of 1688

⁵⁸ M. R. James, himself

⁵⁹ Hugh Macnaghten – a man who did not get on very well with James: they had strongly contrasting personalities, tastes, and habits

As a Scout, Wilcox secured every badge⁶⁰ and distinction for which he competed. The Cookery Badge, the Map-making Badge, the Life-saving Badge, the Badge for picking up bits of newspaper, the Badge for not slamming the door when leaving pupil-room, and many others. Of the Life-saving Badge I may have a word to say when we come to treat of Stanley Judkins.

You cannot be surprised to hear that Mr. Hope Jones⁶¹ added a special verse to each of his songs, in commendation of Arthur Wilcox, or that the Lower Master⁶² burst into tears when handing him the Good Conduct Medal in its handsome claret-coloured case: the medal which had been unanimously voted to him by the whole of Third Form⁶³. Unanimously, did I say? I am wrong. There was one dissentient, Judkins *mi*.⁶⁴, who said that he had excellent reasons for acting as he did. He shared, it seems, a room with his major⁶⁵. You cannot, again, wonder that in after years Arthur Wilcox was the first, and so far the only boy, to become Captain of both the School and of the Oppidans⁶⁶, or that the strain of carrying out the duties of both positions, coupled with the ordinary work of the school, was so severe that a complete rest for six months, followed by a voyage round the world, was pronounced an absolute necessity by the family doctor.

It would be a pleasant task to trace the steps by which he attained the giddy eminence he now occupies; but for the moment enough of Arthur Wilcox. Time presses, and we must turn to a very different matter: the career of Stanley Judkins—Judkins *ma*.

Stanley Judkins, like Arthur Wilcox, attracted the attention of the authorities; but in quite another fashion. It was to him that the Lower Master said with no cheerful smile, "What, again, Judkins? A very little persistence in this course of conduct, my boy, and you will have cause to regret that you ever

⁶⁰ An award – by way of a fabric patch sewn onto a sash worn across the Scout uniform – given after a Scout has been judged to have mastered a skill (such as fire-starting, fishing, Morse code, or map making)

⁶¹ William Hope-Jones was a popular housemaster at Eton, renowned for his massive, stentorian voice and for writing rousing campfire songs (notably, the Scout song, "The Woad Ode")

⁶² Sir Clarence Henry Kennett Marten

⁶³ The grade in secondary school occupied by 12 – 13 year-olds (analogous to the American 8th grade)

⁶⁴ That is "Judkins, *minor*" or, "Judkins the Younger" – a term used to differentiate younger (minor) and older (major) brothers, much in the same way that junior and senior differentiate from father and son. In other words, this is Judkins' kid brother who dissented from voting for Wilcox out of fear of "Judkins, *major*"

⁶⁵ Again, that is to say, with his older brother

⁶⁶ Oddipans are non-scholarship students at Eton who paid to attend the school and lived in the town. Students from the School had scholarships and lived on campus

entered this academy. There, take that, and that, and think yourself very lucky you don't get that and that!" It was Judkins, again, whom the Provost had cause to notice as he passed through the playing fields, when a cricket ball struck him with considerable force on the ankle, and a voice from a short way off cried, "Thank you, cut-over⁶⁷!" "I think," said the Provost, pausing for a moment to rub his ankle, "that that boy had better fetch his cricket ball for himself!" "Indeed, yes," said the Vice-Provost, "and if he comes within reach, I will do my best to fetch him something else."

As a Scout, Stanley Judkins secured no badge save those which he was able to abstract from members of other patrols. In the cookery competition he was detected trying to introduce squibs⁶⁸ into the Dutch oven⁶⁹ of the next-door competitors. In the tailoring competition he succeeded in sewing two boys together very firmly, with disastrous effect when they tried to get up. For the Tidiness Badge he was disqualified, because, in the Midsummer schooltime, which chanced to be hot, he could not be dissuaded from sitting with his fingers in the ink: as he said, for coolness' sake. For one piece of paper which he picked up, he must have dropped at least six banana skins or orange peels. Aged women seeing him approaching would beg him with tears in their eyes not to carry their pails of water across the road. They knew too well what the result would inevitably be. But it was in the life-saving competition that Stanley Judkins's conduct was most blameable and had the most far-reaching effects. The practice, as you know, was to throw a selected lower boy⁷⁰, of suitable dimensions, fully dressed, with his hands and feet tied together, into the deepest part of Cuckoo Weir⁷¹, and to time the Scout whose turn it was to rescue him⁷². On every occasion when he was entered for this competition Stanley Judkins was seized, at the critical moment, with a severe fit of cramp, which caused him to roll on the ground and utter alarming cries. This naturally distracted the attention of those present from the boy in the water, and had it not been for the presence of Arthur Wilcox the death-roll would have been a heavy one. As it was, the Lower Master found it necessary to take a firm line and say that the competition must be discontinued. It was in vain that Mr. Beasley Robinson⁷³ represented to him that in five competitions only four lower boys had actually

⁶⁷ "Hit it back!"

⁶⁸ Fire crackers

⁶⁹ A large, thick cooking pot with a tight-fitting lid which is especially useful in campfire cooking

⁷⁰ That is, a boy from a lower grade/form

⁷¹ A stream near Eton which was used for teaching swimming

⁷² This is, of course, a joke on James' part: no such practice existed, but his description of it surely led to laughter from the upperclassmen

⁷³ A. C. Beasley Robinson was a master at Eton

succumbed⁷⁴. The Lower Master said that he would be the last to interfere in any way with the work of the Scouts; but that three of these boys had been valued members of his choir, and both he and Dr. Ley⁷⁵ felt that the inconvenience caused by the losses outweighed the advantages of the competitions. Besides, the correspondence with the parents of these boys had become annoying, and even distressing: they were no longer satisfied with the printed form which he was in the habit of sending out⁷⁶, and more than one of them had actually visited Eton and taken up much of his valuable time with complaints. So the life-saving competition is now a thing of the past.

In short, Stanley Judkins was no credit to the Scouts, and there was talk on more than one occasion of informing him that his services were no longer required. This course was strongly advocated by Mr. Lambart⁷⁷: but in the end milder counsels prevailed, and it was decided to give him another chance.



So it is that we find him at the beginning of the Midsummer Holidays⁷⁸ of 19— at the Scouts' camp in the beautiful district of W (or X) in the county of D (or Y)⁷⁹.

It was a lovely morning, and Stanley Judkins and one or two of his friends— for he still had friends—lay basking on the top of the down⁸⁰. Stanley was lying on his stomach with his chin propped on his hands, staring into the distance.

"I wonder what that place is," he said.

"Which place?" said one of the others.

"That sort of clump in the middle of the field down there."

"Oh, ah! How should I know what it is?"

"What do you want to know for?" said another.

⁷⁴ Drowned

⁷⁵ Henry George Ley – an organist and composer – was music master at Eton

⁷⁶ Sadly, this reference – although another dark joke – almost certainly comes from personal experience. During World War I, when James was provost of King's College at Cambridge, it was his duty to hand write a letter of condolence to the families of any students of King's who were killed in combat overseas. He was traumatized by the experience and haunted by the loss of so many fine men. Unlike James – but like his fictional treatment of Eton – the British government mailed families of dead soldiers a printed letter of condolence

⁷⁷ Julian Lambart was an Eton master

⁷⁸ Taking place from mid-July to early September

⁷⁹ Worbarrow Bay in Dorset, on England's southern coast. This sandy district was where the Scouts were camped when he read the story to them, and the terrain described was accurate enough to keep several boys up all night with fear

⁸⁰ A rounded, grassy hill composed of chalk

"I don't know: I like the look of it. What's it called? Nobody got a map?" said Stanley. "Call yourselves Scouts!"

"Here's a map all right," said Wilfred Pipsqueak, ever resourceful, "and there's the place marked on it. But it's inside the red ring⁸¹. We can't go there."

"Who cares about a red ring?" said Stanley. "But it's got no name on your silly map."

"Well, you can ask this old chap what it's called if you're so keen to find out." "This old chap" was an old shepherd who had come up and was standing behind them.

"Good morning, young gents," he said, "you've got a fine day for your doin's, ain't you?"

"Yes, thank you," said Algernon de Montmorency, with native politeness. "Can you tell us what that clump over there's called? And what's that thing inside it?"

"Course I can tell you," said the shepherd. "That's Wailin' Well, that is. But you ain't got no call to worry about that."

"Is it a well in there?" said Algernon. "Who uses it?"

The shepherd laughed. "Bless you," he said, "there ain't from a man to a sheep in these parts uses Wailin' Well, nor haven't done all the years I've lived here."

"Well, there'll be a record broken to-day, then," said Stanley Judkins, "because I shall go and get some water out of it for tea!"

"Sakes alive, young gentleman!" said the shepherd in a startled voice, "don't you get to talkin' that way! Why, ain't your masters give you notice not to go by there? They'd ought to have done."

"Yes, they have," said Wilfred Pipsqueak.

"Shut up, you ass!" said Stanley Judkins. "What's the matter with it? Isn't the water good? Anyhow, if it was boiled, it would be all right."

"I don't know as there's anything much wrong with the water," said the shepherd. "All I know is, my old dog wouldn't go through that field, let alone me or anyone else that's got a morsel of brains in their heads."

"More fool them⁸²," said Stanley Judkins, at once rudely and ungrammatically. "Who ever took any harm going there?" he added.

"Three women and a man," said the shepherd gravely. "Now just you listen to me. I know these 'ere parts and you don't, and I can tell you this much: for these ten years last past there ain't been a sheep fed in that field, nor a crop raised off of it—and it's good land, too. You can pretty well see from here what a state it's got into with brambles and suckers and trash of all kinds. *You've got*

⁸¹ Areas deemed to be either dangerous, private property, or otherwise off limits were outlined in red on the maps given to Scouts

⁸² "Then they are more the fool for it"

a glass⁸³, young gentleman," he said to Wilfred Pipsqueak, "you can tell with that anyway."

"Yes," said Wilfred, "but I see there's tracks in it. Someone must go through it sometimes."

"Tracks!" said the shepherd. "I believe you! Four tracks: three women and a man."

"What d'you mean, three women and a man?" said Stanley, turning over for the first time and looking at the shepherd (he had been talking with his back to him till this moment: he was an ill-mannered boy).

"Mean? Why, what I says: three women and a man."

"Who are they?" asked Algernon. "Why do they go there?"

"There's some p'r'aps could tell you who they was," said the shepherd, "but it was afore my time they come by their end. And why they goes there still is more than the children of men can tell: except I've heard they was all bad 'uns when they was alive."

"By George, what a rum⁸⁴ thing!" Algernon and Wilfred muttered: but Stanley was scornful and bitter.

"Why, you don't mean they're deaders? What rot! You must be a lot of fools to believe that. Who's ever seen them, I'd like to know?"

"I've seen 'em, young gentleman!" said the shepherd, "seen 'em from near by on that bit of down: and my old dog, if he could speak, he'd tell you he've seen 'em, same time. About four o'clock of the day it was, much such a day as this. I see 'em, each one of 'em, come peerin' out of the bushes and stand up, and work their way slow by them tracks towards the trees in the middle where the well is."

"And what were they like? Do tell us!" said Algernon and Wilfred eagerly.

"Rags and bones, young gentlemen: all four of 'em: flutterin' rags and whity bones. It seemed to me as if I could hear 'em clackin' as they got along. Very slow they went, and lookin' from side to side."

"What were their faces like? Could you see?"

"They hadn't much to call faces," said the shepherd, "but I could seem to see as they had teeth⁸⁵."

"Lor'!" said Wilfred, "and what did they do when they got to the trees?"

"I can't tell you that, sir," said the shepherd. "I wasn't for stayin' in that place, and if I had been, I was bound to look to my old dog: he'd gone! Such a thing he never done before as leave me; but gone he had, and when I came up with him in the end, he was in that state he didn't know me, and was fit to fly at my throat. But I kep' talkin' to him, and after a bit he remembered my voice and

⁸³ Telescope

⁸⁴ Strange, disturbing, peculiar

⁸⁵ "But I seemed to be able to tell that they had teeth"

came creepin' up like a child askin' pardon. I never want to see him like that again, nor yet no other dog."

The dog, who had come up and was making friends all round, looked up at his master, and expressed agreement with what he was saying very fully.

The boys pondered for some moments on what they had heard: after which Wilfred said: "And why's it called Wailing Well?"

"If you was round here at dusk of a winter's evening, you wouldn't want to ask why," was all the shepherd said.

"Well, I don't believe a word of it," said Stanley Judkins, "and I'll go there next chance I get: blowed⁸⁶ if I don't!"

"Then you won't be ruled by⁸⁷ me?" said the shepherd. "Nor yet by your masters as warned you off? Come now, young gentleman, you don't want for sense, I should say. What should I want tellin' you a pack of lies? It ain't sixpence to me anyone goin' in that field: but I wouldn't like to see a young chap snuffed out like in his prime."

"I expect it's a lot more than sixpence to you," said Stanley. "I expect you've got a whisky still or something in there, and want to keep other people away. Rot I call it. Come on back, you boys."

So they turned away. The two others said, "Good evening" and "Thank you" to the shepherd, but Stanley said nothing. The shepherd shrugged his shoulders and stood where he was, looking after them rather sadly.

On the way back to the camp there was great argument about it all, and Stanley was told as plainly as he could be told all the sorts of fools he would be if he went to the Wailing Well.

That evening, among other notices, Mr. Beasley Robinson asked if all maps had got the red ring marked on them. "Be particular," he said, "not to trespass inside it."

Several voices—among them the sulky one of Stanley Judkins—said, "Why not, sir?"

"Because not," said Mr. Beasley Robinson, "and if that isn't enough for you, I can't help it." He turned and spoke to Mr. Lambart in a low voice, and then said, "I'll tell you this much: we've been asked to warn Scouts off that field. It's very good of the people to let us camp here at all, and the least we can do is to oblige them—I'm sure you'll agree to that."

Everybody said, "Yes, sir!" except Stanley Judkins, who was heard to mutter, "Oblige them be blowed!"

So

Early in the afternoon of the next day, the following dialogue was heard. "Wilcox, is all your tent there?"

⁸⁶ Damned

⁸⁷ Obey

"No, sir, Judkins isn't!"

"That boy is *the* most infernal nuisance ever invented! Where do you suppose he is?"

"I haven't an idea, sir."

"Does anybody else know?"

"Sir, I shouldn't wonder if he'd gone to the Wailing Well."

"Who's that? Pipsqueak? What's the Wailing Well?"

"Sir, it's that place in the field by—well, sir, it's in a clump of trees in a rough field."

"D'you mean inside the red ring? Good heavens! What makes you think he's gone there?"

"Why, he was terribly keen to know about it yesterday, and we were talking to a shepherd man, and he told us a lot about it and advised us not to go there: but Judkins didn't believe him, and said he meant to go."

"Young ass!" said Mr. Hope Jones, "did he take anything with him?"

"Yes, I think he took some rope and a can. We did tell him he'd be a fool to go."

"Little brute! What the deuce does he mean by pinching stores like that! Well, come along, you three, we must see after him. Why can't people keep the simplest orders? What was it the man told you? No, don't wait, let's have it as we go along."

And off they started—Algernon and Wilfred talking rapidly and the other two listening with growing concern. At last they reached that spur of down overlooking the field of which the shepherd had spoken the day before. It commanded the place completely; the well inside the clump of bent and gnarled Scotch firs was plainly visible, and so were the four tracks winding about among the thorns and rough growth.

It was a wonderful day of shimmering heat. The sea looked like a floor of metal. There was no breath of wind. They were all exhausted when they got to the top, and flung themselves down on the hot grass.

"Nothing to be seen of him yet," said Mr. Hope Jones, "but we must stop here a bit. You're done up—not to speak of me. Keep a sharp look-out," he went on after a moment, "I thought I saw the bushes stir."

"Yes," said Wilcox, "so did I. Look ... no, that can't be him. It's somebody though, putting their head up, isn't it?"

"I thought it was, but I'm not sure."

Silence for a moment. Then:

"That's him, sure enough," said Wilcox, "getting over the hedge on the far side. Don't you see? With a shiny thing. That's the can you said he had."

"Yes, it's him, and he's making straight for the trees," said Wilfred.

At this moment Algernon, who had been staring with all his might, broke into a scream.

"What's that on the track? On all fours—O, it's the woman. O, don't let me look at her! Don't let it happen!" And he rolled over, clutching at the grass and trying to bury his head in it.

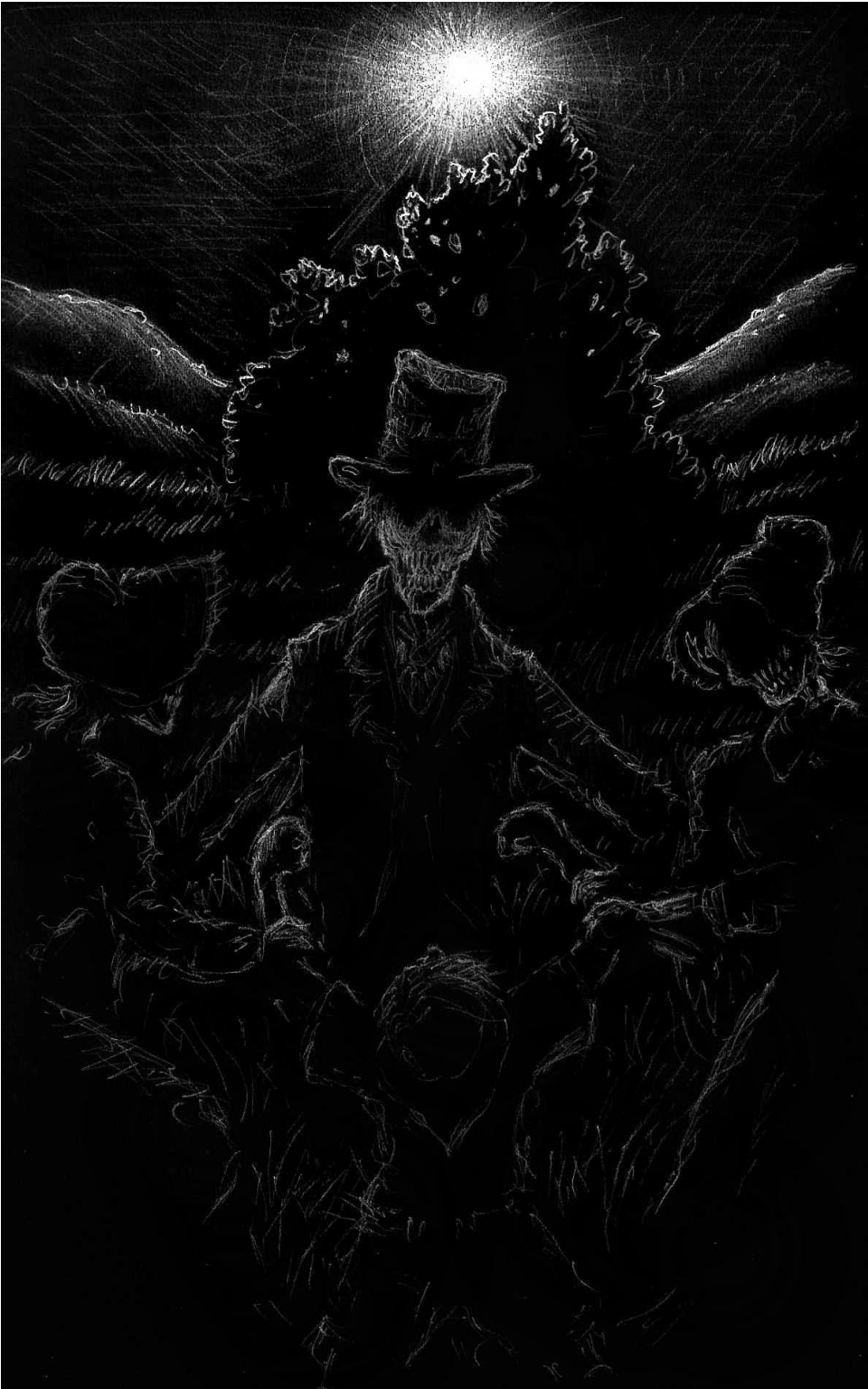
"Stop that!" said Mr. Hope Jones loudly—but it was no use. "Look here," he said, "I must go down there. You stop here, Wilfred, and look after that boy. Wilcox, you run as hard as you can to the camp and get some help."

They ran off, both of them. Wilfred was left alone with Algernon, and did his best to calm him, but indeed he was not much happier himself. From time to time he glanced down the hill and into the field. He saw Mr. Hope Jones drawing nearer at a swift pace, and then, to his great surprise, he saw him stop, look up and round about him, and turn quickly off at an angle! What could be the reason? He looked at the field, and there he saw a terrible figure—something in ragged black—with whitish patches breaking out of it: the head, perched on a long thin neck, half hidden by a shapeless sort of blackened sun-bonnet. The creature was waving thin arms in the direction of the rescuer who was approaching, as if to ward him off: and between the two figures the air seemed to shake and shimmer as he had never seen it: and as he looked, he began himself to feel something of a waviness and confusion in his brain, which made him guess what might be the effect on someone within closer range of the influence. He looked away hastily, to see Stanley Judkins making his way pretty quickly towards the clump, and in proper Scout fashion; evidently picking his steps with care to avoid treading on snapping sticks or being caught by arms of brambles. Evidently, though he saw nothing, he suspected some sort of ambush, and was trying to go noiselessly. Wilfred saw all that, and he saw more, too. With a sudden and dreadful sinking at the heart, he caught sight of someone among the trees, waiting: and again of someone—another of the hideous black figures—working slowly along the track from another side of the field, looking from side to side, as the shepherd had described it. Worst of all, he saw a fourth—unmistakably a man this time—rising out of the bushes a few yards behind the wretched Stanley, and painfully, as it seemed, crawling into the track. On all sides the miserable victim was cut off.

Wilfred was at his wits' end. He rushed at Algernon and shook him. "Get up," he said. "Yell! Yell as loud as you can. Oh, if we'd got a whistle!"

Algernon pulled himself together. "There's one," he said, "Wilcox's: he must have dropped it."

So one whistled, the other screamed. In the still air the sound carried. Stanley heard: he stopped: he turned round: and then indeed a cry was heard more piercing and dreadful than any that the boys on the hill could raise. It was too late. The crouched figure behind Stanley sprang at him and caught him about the waist. The dreadful one that was standing waving her arms waved them again, but in exultation. The one that was lurking among the trees shuffled forward, and she too stretched out her arms as if to clutch at something coming her way; and the other, farthest off, quickened her pace and came on, nodding



gleefully. The boys took it all in in an instant of terrible silence, and hardly could they breathe as they watched the horrid struggle between the man and his victim. Stanley struck with his can, the only weapon he had. The rim of a broken black hat fell off the creature's head and showed a white skull with stains that might be wisps of hair. By this time one of the women had reached the pair, and was pulling at the rope that was coiled about Stanley's neck. Between them they overpowered him in a moment: the awful screaming ceased, and then the three passed within the circle of the clump of firs.

Yet for a moment it seemed as if rescue might come. Mr. Hope Jones, striding quickly along, suddenly stopped, turned, seemed to rub his eyes, and then started running *towards* the field. More: the boys glanced behind them, and saw not only a troop of figures from the camp coming over the top of the next down, but the shepherd running up the slope of their own hill. They beckoned, they shouted, they ran a few yards towards him and then back again. He mended his pace.

Once more the boys looked towards the field. There was nothing. Or, was there something among the trees? Why was there a mist about the trees? Mr. Hope Jones had scrambled over the hedge, and was plunging through the bushes.

The shepherd stood beside them, panting. They ran to him and clung to his arms. "They've got him! In the trees!" was as much as they could say, over and over again.

"What? Do you tell me he've gone in there after all I said to him yesterday? Poor young thing! Poor young thing!" He would have said more, but other voices broke in. The rescuers from the camp had arrived. A few hasty words, and all were dashing down the hill.

They had just entered the field when they met Mr. Hope Jones. Over his shoulder hung the corpse of Stanley Judkins. He had cut it from the branch to which he found it hanging, waving to and fro. There was not a drop of blood in the body.

On the following day Mr. Hope Jones sallied forth with an axe and with the expressed intention of cutting down every tree in the clump, and of burning every bush in the field. He returned with a nasty cut in his leg and a broken axe-helve⁸⁸. Not a spark of fire could he light, and on no single tree could he make the least impression.

I have heard that the present population of the Wailing Well field consists of three women, a man, and a boy.

The shock experienced by Algernon de Montmorency and Wilfred Pipsqueak was severe. Both of them left the camp at once; and the occurrence undoubtedly cast a gloom—if but a passing one—on those who remained. One of the first to recover his spirits was Judkins *mi*.

⁸⁸ Handle

Such, gentlemen, is the story of the career of Stanley Judkins, and of a portion of the career of Arthur Wilcox. It has, I believe, never been told before. If it has a moral, that moral is, I trust, obvious: if it has none, I do not well know how to help it.

“WAILING Well”’s literary merits lay mainly in aesthetics: as James admits in his closing sentence, its moral is obvious, and it doesn’t – so far as I can tell – have any radically deep themes, subtexts, or symbolism. Simply put, it is a beautiful story, and a perfect example of the genre of campfire legend, complete with a vague but disturbing backstory and memorable visceral details. James’ prose – at least from the moment that we find Judkins scowling darkly at Wailing Well amidst the shimmering heat, with the sea looking like a floor of metal – is par excellence. Tight and evocative, he wastes no words, and infuses the final four pages with heaps of atmosphere. Perhaps keeping his audience in mind, he unloads some of his most poetic and evocative lines: who cannot shiver at the mention of the flutterin’ rags and whity bones, the stains that might be wisps of hair, and – of course – the best line of the story: “they hadn’t much to call faces ... but I could seem to see as they had teeth.” James is often criticized for either telling too much (“An Evening’s Entertainment”), and being too indulgent, or not enough (“Two Doctors”), and being too coy. Here, in “Wailing Well,” he knows exactly what details to show to pique curiosity, and what details to withhold to tantalize the imagination. Perhaps the most obvious mystery of this story – and one in which James appears to take giddy delight – is the backstory of the ghosts of “Wailing Well”: “three women and a man.” The shepherd is unfortunately either under-informed, or intentionally tight-lipped to help flesh out their origins, although he is able to suggest that “they was all bad ‘uns when they was alive.” Although I truly do believe that James had a background in mind when he created the ghoulish quartet and their insane, animalistic ritual of prowling through the fields at midday in search of victims, I think the basic information of the genders and number are entirely sufficient to give us the glimpse into what he is suggesting. Three – a number associated with the Trinity – can often be used to either suggest holiness or perversion. In particular, a man with three women has a naturally depraved suggestion: one and man and a woman are likely to be lovers (perhaps scandalous, depending on the details, but still pretty missionary-style in terms of convention), and suggest something more romantic than repelling, and one man and two women – certainly more eyebrow raising – may represent a tragic love triangle, and elicit more pathos than revulsion. Three women and a man, however, is just enough to imply a sort of degeneracy without becoming a harem.

II.

Of course, they could be a father and his daughters or a brother and his sisters, but few readers have ever assumed anything less than a kind of menage a trois

existing between the four figures: their identification, fundamentally, by their gender instantly causes us to imagine an equally fundamental relationship between them. The most obvious literary hyperlink here comes from Bram Stoker's *Dracula*: the domineering Count served by his three carnivorous brides. This may be part of the reason (along with the chilling detail of Judkins' bloodless corpse) that this story is frequently catalogued as a vampire story. Although James never goes into further detail of who these figures were, what they did to become undead, what their motives are for prowling Wailing Well's environs, and what they get out of killing Judkins, it is clear – as the shepherd suggests – that they were unquestionably corrupt during life, and that their afterlife must somehow reflect or illustrate the way that they lived. Several modern attempts have been made to speculate on what this may have been, including a short film that changes the foursome to a couple who ran a school and murdered naughty children by disposing of them into the well, and a writing contest from "Ghosts and Scholars," which the winner of which depicted them as three sisters who each lusted after the same rogue, and used black magic to win his affections, before it takes a turn after "The Monkey's Paw," and they get more than they asked for. Overall, the story remains extraordinarily simple and powerful, and its strength, perhaps, lies in James masterful plotting: how he gradually transitions what begins as a schoolboy comedy – a cheeky blend of P. G. Wodehouse and Tom Sawyer – gradually becomes darker, easing from insider satire to the black humor of the drowning underclassmen, before we sense a sudden drop in temperature (beautifully and ironically contrasted with a sweltering summer afternoon) as we find Judkins glowering at the dank copse that draws him to his death like an insidious decoy luring the prey to the predators. By the end of the story, we have no memory of the tedious, semi-comic beginning, and our only thought – a thought which James planted at the ending as a sadistic nightcap for his campers' imaginations – is the delicious line: "I have heard that the present population of the Wailing Well field consists of three women, a man, and a boy."