

Top 10 Antiquarian Ghost Stories by M R James

1. A Warning to the Curious – an antiquarian digs up an ancient crown and gets much more than he bargained for. See my Introduction in Prospero’s Mirror for further comments.
2. ‘Oh Whistle, and I’ll Come to You, My Lad’ – James’s most famous story (after two excellent TV adaptations), but also his most misunderstood. Parkins is not an old fart as Jonathan Miller has Basil Rathbone portray him. That’s partly the point: if he had been a Latinist rather than an ‘Ontographer’ he might have been more careful about blowing that whistle. James’s repressed homosexual panic has never been clearer – or more effective.
3. Lost Hearts – a young boy’s visit to an avuncular scholar of gnostic heresies descends into witchcraft, child abuse, and cannibalism.
4. The Treasure of Abbot Thomas – even the whole opening paragraph being entirely in Latin can’t prepare the reader for the frightening mystery set in a ruined Abbey in the Rhineland.
5. A School Story – a Byzantine coin and a disturbing message in a Latin prose exercise lead a teacher with a secret to a well amongst four yew trees. A much-neglected revenge story with another hint of James’s homosexual panic.
6. Mr Humphreys and His Inheritance – a haunted country house maze disguises a Borgesian labyrinth of arcane meaning, religious heresy, and philosophical reflection.
7. Canon Alberic’s Scrapbook – Dennistoun gets more than he bargains for when he buys an antique manuscript from a sacristan in a decaying town in France. But why does the sacristan insist on such a precise sum in payment? And did Canon Alberic summon one of Solomon’s demons (Orsian? – or perhaps Lilith?) to help him search for Templar treasure? As ever, there is much more going on than meets the eye.
8. Casting the Runes – a thriller as well as a ghost story, as the protagonists are forced into a fatal battle of wits against the demonic Karswell: a thinly-disguised portrait of the demonologist Aleister Crowley.
9. The Ash-tree – ‘Her young ones also suck up blood’: the tale of Mrs Mothersole’s supernatural revenge on the Fell family is definitely not recommended for arachnophobes. This story was clearly influenced by James’s childhood home at Livermere (as was ‘A Vignette’, which recounts a real ghost sighting he had there as a child).
10. The Wailing Well – part-set at a thinly-disguised Eton, this story is unusual both in being humorous and in dealing with a sort of Vampirism. Not entirely successful, but still rather scary.