

A PLEASING TERROR: TWO GHOST STORIES BY M.R. JAMES

Performed by Robert Lloyd Parry on 3 March 2007 at the Tinahely Courthouse Arts Centre

. . . If any of my stories succeed in causing their readers to feel pleasantly uncomfortable when walking along a solitary road at nightfall, or sitting over a dying fire in the small hours, my purpose in writing them will have been attained . . .

-M.R. James

ON THE NIGHT I LEFT my south Dublin flat for a tiny theatre in the deepest, remotest part of County Wicklow, an orange, almost reddish, moon hung low in the sky just beyond the Rathmines clock tower, awaiting that night's lunar eclipse. As we travelled further into the rural countryside—with an entire mountain range between us and the nearest proper city—the roads narrowed, the trees and shrubbery crowded in on us, and a fog pressed itself like thin gauze across the low fields and valleys. From the safety of the car I wondered what I might encounter if I walked alone into any one of those mist-shrouded and presumably vacant fields. My spine tingled as it became apparent that this was a night perfectly suited for what M.R. James aptly termed in his landmark essay 'Some Remarks on Ghost Stories', "a pleasing terror".

For those who keep their ears firmly pressed to the unhallowed ground, the name Robert Lloyd Parry is not entirely unfamiliar. Since September 2006, Mr. Lloyd Parry, the sole member of the Nunkie Theatre Company (www.nunkie.co.uk), has toured England and Ireland with his much lauded, one-man show *A Pleasing Terror: Two Ghost Stories by M.R. James*. Christmas-time saw an impressive 20-date run at London's New End Theatre, and on the night of March 3rd the show was booked for the Courthouse Arts Centre in rural Tinahely, Wicklow. On that night we had crossed the lonesome wild to see Lloyd Parry perform two of James's most celebrated stories: 'Canon Alberic's Scrapbook' and 'The Mezzotint'.

Upon entering the venue, I was greeted by the faint sound of a cathedral choir. Indeed, Tinahely's Arts Centre, with its flagstone floor and exposed timber beams, reminded me of a modern Swedish church. And for being such an out of the way village, I wondered from whence the fifty plus people had arrived. But there they were, quietly chatting and hardly taking notice of the cowed figure sitting in a great armchair at the centre of the stage—that is until the lights dim and we are left with the sole illumination of a candelabra. A monastic Pyrenean chant drowns out the choir, and the hitherto motionless figure slowly raises its head. We expect something ghastly, but are collectively relieved to see the kind expression of a scholarly looking gentleman who is but steaming his face over an enamel bowl of hot water and friar's balsam. We are no longer in a modern theatre, but transported to the Provost's drawing room at King's College, Cambridge and into the presence of the storyteller himself as he might have been when he first told 'Canon Alberic's Scrapbook' to the Chitchat Society in October of 1893. For an instant we feel like voyeurs as we watch James sniffle away a cold and wipe the steam from his circular, gold-rimmed glasses, but the moment of discomfort passes when, with an air of welcoming familiarity, he begins his tale: "St. Bertrand de Comminges is a decayed town on the spurs of the Pyrenees, not very far from Toulouse, and still nearer to Bagnères-de-Luchon . . ."

In addition to writing some of the finest ghost stories in the English language, Dr James was a noted antiquarian and bibliophile. He knew first hand the thrill of discovering ancient manuscripts or long lost tomes in secluded corners of the world, so it is not at all surprising when his stories draw on his own experiences. In ‘Canon Alberic’s Scrapbook’, a Cambridge man (“let us call him Dennistoun”!) discovers a medieval scrapbook in a tiny French village, which he acquires for a pittance. Its leaves are filled with pages collected from various priceless illuminated manuscripts, a singular treasure! But it is from the pages of this curious scrapbook that Dennistoun begins to understand why the French sacristan does not wish for anyone to be left alone in the old church. M.R. James, channelled by Lloyd Parry, describes St. Bertrand de Comminges and its old hilltop church with a keen antiquarian eye, though one that infuses an excitement into details that are never reduced to a dry catalogue-like recitation; and the absolute giddiness with which Dennistoun discovers the Canon’s scrapbook is palpable. James had a knack for these sorts of details and they lend his stories a sort of exotic erudition; Lloyd Parry seizes on these finer points and brings them to exquisite life in the re-telling.

And anyone who thinks James is a stuffy and reserved Edwardian, or pulls his punches when it comes to the ghastlier details, should just wait until the climax’s unsettling description of a biblical demon. After the show I overheard one audience member tell Lloyd Parry that she did not expect to be scared during the performance and was surprised to find that she had not only moved to the edge of her seat during ‘Canon Alberic’, but even had to wipe the sweat from her palms when the lights came up at intermission. I myself am a horror stalwart and am happy to report that I too experienced a keen sense of being pleasantly uncomfortable during the aforementioned scene. I think James would have been pleased.

My previous familiarity with ‘Canon Alberic’ and ‘The Mezzotint’ did not detract from my enjoyment in the slightest. In fact, I almost felt as if I were hearing them for the first time. I always knew that James had a sly sense of humour, but to hear an audience respond to it is a revelation. This humour is particularly evident in the night’s second story ‘The Mezzotint’, one of my personal favourites. In this story a museum curator named Williams obtains a thoroughly unremarkable mezzotint depicting an unidentified, moonlit manor house: “All that remained were the ends of two lines of writing: the first had the letters --ngley Hall; the second, --ssex.” But the mezzotint takes on a horrifying significance when a hooded figure appears that was not there before: “. . . black drapery hung down over its face so that only hints of that could be seen, and what was visible made the spectators profoundly thankful that they could see no more than a white dome-like forehead and a few straggling hairs.” The tone of ‘The Mezzotint’ differs greatly to ‘Canon Alberic’ in that it is a ghostly mystery confined to the drawing room where academic logic is king; and the rational witnesses to the mezzotint’s ghostly scene are helpless in their terror. Again, one gets the impression that any one of the drawing room gentlemen could be James himself, and indeed Lloyd Parry retains the same accent for Mr. Williams that he uses for James.

M.R. James was known for his mastery of many accents and never hesitated to employ them in the telling. The same is true of Mr. Lloyd Parry who deftly switches between James’s almost larger than life received pronunciation, the meek French accent of the haunted sacristan, and the cockney accent of the college skip Mr. Filcher in ‘The Mezzotint’. James’s stories were written to be read aloud, and A Pleasing Terror

is as close to an authentic recreation as we are likely to come—unless you are lucky enough to see Lloyd Parry perform in James's rooms at Eton, King's or the Fitzwilliam Museum. He should be applauded for his attention to detail in bringing these frighteningly fun stories to the stage.

Those who missed *A Pleasing Terror* at its three sold out shows at the Cork Theatre Festival last summer, or who were too timid to venture beyond the pale to Tinahely, will be pleased to hear that Robert Lloyd Parry will be performing his show this spring at the Andrews Lane Theatre Studio (www.andrewslane.com) in Dublin from Monday the 16th through Saturday the 21st of April. Having thoroughly enjoyed *A Pleasing Terror* myself, I enthusiastically recommend it to those who appreciate the time-honoured tradition of the ghost story or indeed to anyone who looks upon a moonlit field with unexplained nervousness.

Brian J. Showers