IRISH GHOST STORIES

Selection and Introduction by
DAVID STUART DAVIES

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INTRODUCTION

The Irish writer is ideally suited to creating stories of strange ghostly happenings. At his best the Irish writer has a wild and fantastical imagination causing him to view life though a wonderfully strange distorting mirror. There is something dream-like and unfettered about the Irish creative force which enables these storytellers to travel down different roads from those of other authors; roads which are bizarre, challenging and eccentric in nature, allowing the Irish scribe to conjure up unexpected and often fantastic scenarios. This flavour can be found in the works of such Irish literary giants as Oscar Wilde, W. B. Yeats, George Bernard Shaw, Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, Spike Milligan, Sheridan Le Fanu and Bram Stoker. Not all wrote ghost stories, of course, but all created fictional works which challenged the imagination and took it to stranger places than it was normally allowed to go – the defining ability of a good ghost-story writer.

This is a collection of some of the best ghost tales created by writers who were not only born in Ireland but also inherited that wild and fantastical imagination I referred to earlier. This volume is like a treatise in the art of raising goose pimples.

Let us consider some of the contributors to this heady brew. It is appropriate to begin with Sheridan Le Fanu, whose stories fill half this volume. His work was held in great esteem by that doyen of the macabre
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narrative Montague Rhodes James. He wrote of Le Fanu:

He stands absolutely in the first rank as a writer of ghost stories . . . Nobody sets the scene better than he, nobody touches in the effective detail more deftly.

SHERIDAN LE FANU (1814–73) was born in 1814 into a middle-class Dublin family of Huguenot descent. He was educated at Trinity College, Dublin, and though he was later called to the bar he never practised law; instead he turned his attention towards journalism and later fiction. In 1869 he became editor and proprietor of the Dublin University Magazine, which in time became a rich repository for horror fiction and ghost stories, many written by himself and often uncredited. The sudden death of his wife in 1858 turned him into an eccentric recluse who wrote his ghost stories in bed. He died of a heart attack in 1873. While he was a popular author for more than twenty years, producing such successful novels as The House by the Churchyard and Uncle Silas, after his death his work was neglected, especially his supernatural fiction. It was not until 1923 when M. R. James, whose literary style and subject matter were heavily influenced by Le Fanu, was responsible for promoting his stories by editing and providing an astute and illuminating introduction to a collection entitled Madam Crowl’s Ghost and Other Stories that Le Fanu’s work was appreciated more widely. It is now regarded as a landmark publication. In it, James, through meticulous research, was able to present many of Le Fanu’s obscure and originally unsigned narratives to the reading public. The collection’s title
story along with five other tales, ‘Squire Toby’s Will’, ‘The Child that went with the Fairies’, ‘An Account of Some Strange Disturbances in Aungier Street’, ‘Ghost Stories of Chapelizod’ and ‘The Vision of Tom Chuff’, are presented in these pages.

These tales were written when the ghost story as a genre was slowly developing into a more literary style of fiction. Many of the early examples of the form had used ghosts as a means of preaching a moral or effecting a change in the mortal who had encountered the spirit from the grave. Dickens was a great exponent of this approach. His *A Christmas Carol* is a fine example, but not the author’s only one, of this use of spirits as a chastising force rather than as an entity to frighten for its own sake or to fulfil an even more sinister purpose. However, shortly before his death Dickens did pen a ghost story, ‘The Signalman’, which was dark and chilling without any moralistic or Gothic trappings. It was frightening in itself, involving a haunting which was created to chill the reader as well as the characters within the tale. However, Le Fanu was already practising this approach and, in fact, in a quiet fashion he developed and refined it. Le Fanu insisted above all else on unity of mood and economy of means in telling his ghostly yarns – a very modern approach for a Victorian writer. His stories are chilling because they draw you into the narrative in an insidious fashion by initiating and then escalating an atmosphere of unease.

E. F. Benson (1867–1940), another great ghost-story writer, observed rather flamboyantly that Le Fanu’s tales ‘begin quietly enough, the tentacles of terror are applied so softly that the reader hardly notices them till they are sucking the courage from
his blood. A darkness gathers, like dusk gently falling, and then something obscurely stirs in it.\textsuperscript{7}

Part of Le Fanu’s success is due to his ability to desist from using the usual props of the traditional ghost story, the Gothic paraphernalia: the haunted castle, the moonlit ruin, the saturnine villain and the distressed lady alone in some Godforsaken spot. He tended to set his tales in surroundings that would be familiar to the average middle-class reader, thus giving the narratives an uncomfortable immediacy.

The autobiographical style of ‘Madam Crowl’s Ghost’, in which the author adopts not only the persona of an old woman remembering a strange incident from her past, but also her quaint peasant Irish tongue in which to tell it, is a clear example of Le Fanu using realism to sharpen the supernatural edge to the narrative. The domestic detail early on, especially when the young child is teased and patronised by the adults, and the general tone of an oral history, make the whole narrative more believable, gracing it with an air of verisimilitude. The plot is a simple one, but it is wrought with such cunning and care that the climactic scenes – the appearance of the ghost and the discovery of Madam Crowl’s secret – are genuinely frightening because in some strange way one can accept them as true.

It is interesting to contrasts this story and the telling of it with the next in the collection, ‘Squire Toby’s Will’, which is related in elegant and sophisticated prose, interposed with realistic dialogue. Using his own knowledge of the law, Le Fanu creates a tale of sibling rivalry tinged with a blossoming strangeness which slowly through the course of the story grows into a chilling account of filial retribution from
beyond the grave. It is typical of Le Fanu’s slow-burn technique that the reader is almost surprised to discover that he has become unnerved by events related in the narrative.

The stories present a blatant acceptance of the unexplained – the supernatural, if you like. There are no pat excuses or explanations to tidy up the events. They all involve instances where the unknown is an accepted fact. But Le Fanu’s cleverness lies in his ability to blur the distinction between reality and the supernatural, making both equally real by presenting his ghost scenes as so psychologically convincing that the materiality or immateriality of the invading presence becomes irrelevant.

Perhaps the clearest statement, if the most paranoid, that we get concerning the reality of the supernatural is in one of his most famous tales, ‘An Account of Some Strange Disturbances in Aungier Street’. The title reads like that of a learned thesis and yet the account involves an infernal presence in a house which appears as a ‘monstrous grey rat’. The narrator submits to the ‘materialism of medicine’ and takes a tonic to dispel his ‘infernal illusion’. This works for a while, suggesting that perhaps this gruesome vision was conjured simply by an overwrought imagination and a fevered brain. However, by subliminal means, Le Fanu has already convinced the reader that the apparition is ‘real’ and so we realise before the narrator that medicine will not fend off this reality for long. And sure enough, the rat returns! Le Fanu’s narrator assures us that even during the calm period ‘the fiend was just as energetic, just as malignant, though I saw him not’.
When Mr Hiram B. Otis, the American Minister, bought Canterville Chase, everyone told him he was doing a very foolish thing, as there was no doubt at all that the place was haunted. Indeed, Lord Canterville himself, who was a man of the most punctilious honour, had felt it his duty to mention the fact to Mr Otis when they came to discuss terms.

‘We have not cared to live in the place ourselves,’ said Lord Canterville, ‘since my grandaunt, the Dowager Duchess of Bolton, was frightened into a fit, from which she never really recovered, by two skeleton hands being placed on her shoulders as she was dressing for dinner, and I feel bound to tell you, Mr Otis, that the ghost has been seen by several living members of my family, as well as by the rector of the parish, the Reverend Augustus Dampier, who is a Fellow of King’s College, Cambridge. After the unfortunate accident to the Duchess, none of our younger servants would stay with us, and Lady Canterville often got very little sleep at night, in consequence of the mysterious noises that came from the corridor and the library.’
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‘My Lord,’ answered the minister, ‘I will take the furniture and the ghost at a valuation. I come from a modern country, where we have everything that money can buy; and with all our spry young fellows painting the Old World red, and carrying off your best actresses and prima-donnas, I reckon that if there were such a thing as a ghost in Europe, we’d have it at home in a very short time in one of our public museums, or on the road as a show.’

‘I fear that the ghost exists,’ said Lord Canterville, smiling, ‘though it may have resisted the overtures of your enterprising impresarios. It has been well known for three centuries, since 1584 in fact, and always makes its appearance before the death of any member of our family.’

‘Well, so does the family doctor for that matter, Lord Canterville. But there is no such thing, sir, as a ghost, and I guess the laws of nature are not going to be suspended for the British aristocracy.’

‘You are certainly very natural in America,’ answered Lord Canterville, who did not quite understand Mr Otis’s last observation, ‘and if you don’t mind a ghost in the house, it is all right. Only you must remember I warned you.’

A few weeks after this, the purchase was completed, and at the close of the season the minister and his family went down to Canterville Chase. Mrs Otis, who, as Miss Lucretia R. Tappan, of West 53rd Street, had been a celebrated New York belle, was now a very handsome, middle-aged woman, with fine eyes and a superb profile. Many American ladies on leaving their native land adopt an appearance of chronic ill-health, under the impression that it is a form of European refinement, but Mrs Otis had
THE CANTERVILLE GHOST

never fallen into this error. She had a magnificent constitution, and a really wonderful amount of animal spirits. Indeed, in many respects, she was quite English, and was an excellent example of the fact that we have really everything in common with America nowadays, except, of course, language. Her eldest son, christened Washington by his parents in a moment of patriotism, which he never ceased to regret, was a fair-haired, rather good-looking young man, who had qualified himself for American diplomacy by leading the German at the Newport Casino for three successive seasons, and even in London was well known as an excellent dancer. Gardenias and the peerage were his only weaknesses. Otherwise he was extremely sensible. Miss Virginia E. Otis was a little girl of fifteen, lithe and lovely as a fawn, and with a fine freedom in her large blue eyes. She was a wonderful amazon, and had once raced old Lord Bilton on her pony twice round the park, winning by a length and a half, just in front of the Achilles statue, to the huge delight of the young Duke of Cheshire, who proposed for her on the spot, and was sent back to Eton that very night by his guardians, in floods of tears. After Virginia came the twins, who were usually called 'the Stars and Stripes', as they were always getting swished. They were delightful boys, and with the exception of the worthy minister, the only true republicans of the family.

As Canterville Chase is seven miles from Ascot, the nearest railway station, Mr Otis had telegraphed for a waggonette to meet them, and they started on their drive in high spirits. It was a lovely July evening, and the air was delicate with the scent of the pine woods. Now and then they heard a woodpigeon brooding
over its own sweet voice, or saw, deep in the rustling
fern, the burnished breast of the pheasant. Little
squirrels peered at them from the beech trees as they
went by, and the rabbits scudded away through the
brushwood and over the mossy knolls, with their
white tails in the air. As they entered the avenue of
Canterville Chase, however, the sky became suddenly
overcast with clouds, a curious stillness seemed to
hold the atmosphere, a great flight of rooks passed
silently over their heads, and, before they reached the
house, some big drops of rain had fallen.

Standing on the steps to receive them was an old
woman, neatly dressed in black silk, with a white cap
and apron. This was Mrs Umney, the housekeeper,
whom Mrs Otis, at Lady Canterville’s earnest request,
had consented to keep on in her former position. She
made them each a low curtsey as they alighted and
said, in a quaint, old-fashioned manner, ‘I bid you
welcome to Canterville Chase.’ Following her, they
passed through the fine Tudor hall into the library, a
long, low room, panelled in black oak, at the end of
which was a large stained-glass window. Here they
found tea laid out for them, and, after taking off their
wraps, they sat down and began to look round, while
Mrs Umney waited on them.

Suddenly Mrs Otis caught sight of a dull red stain
on the floor just by the fireplace and, quite unconscious
of what it really signified, said to Mrs Umney, ‘I am
afraid something has been spilt there.’

‘Yes, madam,’ replied the old housekeeper in a low
voice, ‘blood has been spilt on that spot.’

‘How horrid,’ cried Mrs Otis; ‘I don’t at all care for
bloodstains in a sitting-room. It must be removed at
once.’