



PENGUIN READERS



The Canterville Ghost and Other Stories

Oscar Wilde

The Canterville Ghost and Other Stories

OSCAR WILDE

Level 4

Retold by John Davage

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Introduction

'Well, if you're happy to share your house with a ghost, that's all right,' said Lord Canterville. 'But please remember that I warned you.'

When the American Ambassador, Hiram B. Otis, buys Canterville Chase from Lord Canterville, people try to warn him of the dangers. Everyone knows that the large old house is haunted by the famous Canterville Ghost – the ghost of Sir Simon de Canterville, who murdered his wife.

But Mr Otis and his wife and children are not worried about sharing their new home with a ghost. They are Americans and too modern to believe in ghosts. But they *do* see the ghost and, in their American way, they find him quite amusing – even when they clean a mysterious bloodstain from the library floor every day and it appears again the next morning!

The ghost becomes more and more unhappy. It is his duty to haunt the house, but the Americans aren't frightened by him, and the young Otis boys play terrible tricks on him. What can he do? How can he handle these annoying Americans?

The Canterville Ghost is one of three stories in this book. In the second story, *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime*, Lord Arthur meets the rather unpleasant Mr Podgers at one of Lady Windermere's parties, and his whole life changes. He had plans to marry Sybil Merton, one of the most beautiful girls in London. But now, before he can marry the lovely Sybil, he has to murder someone!

The third story, *The Sphinx Without a Secret*, is about the secret life of beautiful, mysterious Lady Alroy. It is also about the effect her unusual habits have on Lord Gerald Murchison, the man who wants to marry her. Lady Alroy lives in a house in the most expensive part of London, so why does she also rent a room in

a building in one of the poorer streets? What does she do there? Who does she meet?

The writer of these stories, Oscar Wilde, was very successful in late Victorian London because of his short stories, plays and poems, but he was even more famous as one of the greatest characters of his day. He was born in Dublin, Ireland, on 16 October 1854 to Sir William Wilde and his wife Jane Francesca Elgee. Jane was a successful writer (she used the name 'Speranza' for her writing) and translator, and a strong supporter of an independent Ireland. She was also one of Dublin's most popular hostesses. Her fashionable Saturday afternoon meetings for writers and artists in the comfortable Wilde home were very enjoyable and full of exciting, intelligent conversation.

Oscar's father, Sir William, was Ireland's leading ear and eye doctor; he also wrote books about the country's early history and its traditional stories. In addition, in 1844 he gave the money to build a free eye hospital for Dublin's poor people. With this background, it is easy to understand how Oscar Wilde became a great writer, and even more admired for his conversation.

Young Oscar attended Portora Royal School from 1864 to 1871 and enjoyed summer holidays with his family in the country. He then studied at Trinity College, Dublin (1872–1874). He was an excellent student and continued his studies at Magdalen College, Oxford (1874–1878). While there he won a top prize for his poem *Ravenna*.

During his time at Oxford, he met other young men who believed that they could turn their lives into works of art. Oscar wore his hair long, dressed in unusual clothes and decorated his room with flowers and interesting pieces of art. He also became interested in nineteenth-century attitudes towards less traditional types of romantic love.

After his four years at Oxford, Wilde returned to Dublin and

met and fell in love with Florence Balcome, but she loved Bram Stoker, the man who wrote *Dracula*. This caused Wilde to leave Dublin for London in 1878; he returned to Ireland for short visits only twice during the rest of his life.

In London, Wilde became more and more famous for his attitude to life and art and for his lifestyle. Gilbert and Sullivan, very well-known writers for the theatre, used Wilde as the model for the main character in one of their musical plays, *Patience*, in 1881.

As he became more famous, more opportunities came to Wilde. He was invited to New York at the end of 1881 and stayed in the United States for almost a year. He gave more than 140 speeches about his ideas on life and art and met many of the famous American writers of the day, including Henry Longfellow and Walt Whitman. His time in America gave him a clear picture of modern Americans, which he used in *The Canterville Ghost*.

When he returned to London, Wilde met and married Constance Lloyd, the daughter of a rich lawyer who had died when she was sixteen. Like Oscar's mother, Constance had a quick, independent mind and spoke several European languages. Constance's money gave the young couple quite a comfortable life. But they had two sons very quickly: Cyril was born in 1885 and Vyvyan in 1886. Their father needed to find ways to make more money.

Wilde took a job with a magazine (*The Woman's World*) in 1887 and began a very productive time. He wrote short stories, plays, poems and several books for children, including *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* for his sons in 1888. His most famous full-length book, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, appeared in 1890. This is the strange and clever story of a man who does not show his age. He stays young and handsome for many years. At the same time, a picture of the man is hidden from the public. The man in the picture grows old and ugly as the years pass. The idea

for the story came from Wilde's interest in art and beauty. It shows that strange things happen when someone loves beauty and the pleasures of life too much. This book is still popular today and has been used for a film and for several television programmes, but people in Victorian England were shocked by its dark, unusual subjects. People criticised the book because its ideas did not match society's ordinary ideas of good and bad. But Wilde replied with a simple statement: 'Books are well written or badly written.'

His first play, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, was performed in February 1892. Wilde surprised and amused the public on the first night with his unusual sense of fashion; he liked, for example, to wear a large green flower in his jacket. The play was a great success, and Wilde became the most popular British writer for the theatre at that time. *Lady Windermere's Fan* was followed by *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), and his greatest play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). This play looks at life in an unusual way. Unimportant things are very serious and important things are laughed at.

The plays were popular at the end of the nineteenth century and they are still popular today because Wilde had a great gift for writing clever and amusing conversation. They were successful because, as George Bernard Shaw said, 'He plays with everything.' In other words, Wilde changed people's way of looking at themselves and their society. The plays were imaginative, romantic, serious, emotional and, above all, very amusing. They had everything that Victorian theatre-goers were looking for, and the first night of a new Wilde play was a very exciting event.

Although he loved his wife, Wilde spent much of his life away from Constance and his sons. He had many rich and famous friends and was very close to one special man: Lord Alfred Douglas. The two men lived together and followed a way of life that was not accepted as normal in Victorian England. Douglas's

father, an important member of the British upper-classes, was not happy about Wilde's interest in his son. He and Wilde began a terrible fight in the law courts. Wilde's friends advised him to leave England, but he stayed; he wanted to explain and to change people's thinking. But he lost and went to prison for two years. During this time Constance took the children to Switzerland and changed their surname from Wilde to Holland. Constance died in 1898.

Life in prison was very difficult, and Wilde's health suffered. He left prison on 19 May 1897 and decided to use the name Sebastian Melmoth. Oscar and Lord Alfred Douglas saw each other for a short time, but the relationship did not last. Wilde lived quietly and spent the last three years of his life away from society and the art world. With very little money, he had to stay with friends or live in cheap hotels in Paris. He wrote very little, but he produced the poem *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898) to explain the terrible things he had experienced in prison.

Oscar Wilde died on 30 November 1900. Today many people still visit his last resting place in Paris.

Even more than a hundred years after his death, Oscar Wilde continues to be an important figure in modern society. Many books have been written about his life and works, and many films, television programmes, songs and amusing sayings have grown out of his ideas and writings. Oscar Wilde is remembered because his life was a work of art. People were shocked by his hair, his clothes, his flowers, and especially by his romantic ideas, but they were also greatly entertained. We remember Wilde's clever conversation and the characters in his plays because the plays are funny but they also carry a serious message. They show us how to look at life from new and different points of view. They are clever, amusing and very human, and we remember Oscar Wilde with love and admiration today.

The Canterville Ghost

When Hiram B. Otis, the American Ambassador, bought Canterville Chase, people told him that he was doing a very dangerous thing. There was no doubt that the place was haunted, they said. Lord Canterville himself told Mr Otis this when they were discussing the sale.

'We don't live in the place ourselves,' said Lord Canterville. 'Too many members of my family have seen the ghost. My aunt was dressing for dinner one night when she felt two skeleton's hands on her shoulders. The experience made her very ill, and she's never really got better again. After that, none of the younger servants wanted to stay with us, and my wife couldn't sleep there because of the noises at night.'

'Lord Canterville,' answered the Ambassador, 'I will buy the house, the furniture *and* the ghost. I come from a modern country where we have everything that money can buy. And if there *are* ghosts in Europe, I'll be happy to have one. I'll send it home to America, and people will pay to see it and to be frightened by it!'

Lord Canterville smiled. 'I'm afraid there really is a ghost,' he said. 'It's been famous for three centuries – since 1584. It always appears before the death of a member of our family.'

'Well, the family doctor appears too, I expect, Lord Canterville,' said the Ambassador. 'But the doctor is real, unlike the ghost. Believe me, there are no ghosts in any country in the world – not even in very old British families like yours.'

'Well, if you're happy to share your house with a ghost, that's all right,' said Lord Canterville. 'But please remember that I warned you.'

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A few weeks after this, the sale was completed and the Ambassador and his family went down to Canterville Chase by train.

Mrs Otis, when she was Miss Lucretia R. Tappen of West 53rd Street, had been a well-known New York beauty. She was now a fine-looking middle-aged woman, and in many ways she looked like an English lady. She was an excellent example of the fact that there is very little difference between the English and the Americans today, except, of course, for the language.

Her oldest son, Washington, was a fair-haired, rather good-looking young man. He was famous, even in London, as an excellent dancer. He was very sensible, except about certain flowers and about the important families of Europe.

Miss Virginia E. Otis was a lovely girl of fifteen, with large blue eyes. She was a good sportswoman, and loved to ride horses – and she could ride them faster than a lot of men. She had once raced old Lord Blinton on her horse twice round the park, winning easily. She looked wonderful that day, and when the young Duke of Cheshire saw her on horseback he immediately asked her to marry him! Sadly for him, his family sent him back to school that same night. He cried all the way there.

After Virginia came the twins. These were two happy little boys who laughed and shouted a lot. They liked to play tricks on people and were often punished for them.

Canterville Chase is seven miles from Ascot, the nearest railway station, so Mr Otis had arranged a carriage. He and his family started their drive very happily. It was a lovely July evening; birds were singing sweetly, and the fields and trees looked beautiful.

At the beginning of the journey, the sun was shining and the sky was blue. But when they reached Canterville Chase, storm clouds suddenly appeared in the sky. Before they reached the house, rain was falling heavily.

An old woman in a black dress was on the steps to greet them. She was Mrs Umney, the woman who looked after the house. Lady Canterville had asked Mrs Otis to continue Mrs Umney's employment as housekeeper at Canterville Chase, and Mrs Otis had agreed.

'Welcome to Canterville Chase,' Mrs Umney said to the Ambassador and his family.

She led them through the large hall into the library. This was a long low room, with a coloured window at one end. Tea was ready for them, so they took off their coats, sat down and began to look round the room. Mrs Umney poured the tea.

Suddenly, Mrs Otis noticed a dark red stain on the floor, near the fireplace.

'Something has made a stain there,' she said to Mrs Umney.

'Yes, madam,' replied the housekeeper in a low voice. 'It's a bloodstain.'

'How nasty!' cried Mrs Otis. 'I don't like bloodstains in a sitting room. It must go.'

The old woman smiled, and answered in the same low, mysterious voice. 'It's the blood of Lady Eleanore de Canterville,' she said.

'What happened to her?' asked Mrs Otis.

'She was murdered on that exact spot by her own husband, Sir Simon de Canterville, in 1575,' said Mrs Umney. 'Sir Simon lived for nine years after that, and then disappeared suddenly and very mysteriously. His body was never discovered, but his ghost still haunts the Chase. The bloodstain has always been admired by visitors to the house, and it can't be cleaned. People have tried, but it won't go away.'

'Of course it will!' cried Washington Otis. 'Pinkerton's Wonder Stain Cleaner will clean it in a second.'

And before the frightened housekeeper could stop him, he went down on his knees and began cleaning the floor with a small

black stick. In a few minutes the bloodstain had disappeared.

'I knew Pinkerton could do it,' said Washington, and he looked round at his admiring family. But at that moment, lightning lit up the room and a terrible crash of thunder made them all jump up.

Mrs Umney fainted.

'What an awful climate!' said the American Ambassador calmly, as he lit a cigarette.

'Awful,' agreed his wife.

'This country is very full of people. I suppose they don't have enough good weather for everybody,' said Mr Otis.

Mrs Umney lay on the floor with her eyes closed. Mrs Otis looked down at her.

'My dear Hiram,' she cried, 'what can we do with a woman who faints?'

'Make her pay,' answered the Ambassador. 'She has to pay if she breaks something, so tell her to pay if she faints. She won't faint after that.'

And in a few moments Mrs Umney sat up. There was no doubt that she was very upset.

'Be careful,' she warned Mr Otis, and her voice was shaking. 'Trouble is coming to this house.'

'Trouble?' said Mr Otis. He smiled.

'I've seen things with my own eyes, sir, that would make your hair stand on end!' Mrs Umney continued. 'For many nights now I haven't closed my eyes in sleep. I've been too afraid.'

But Mr Otis and his wife told the woman not to worry.

'We're not afraid of ghosts,' said the Ambassador.

So the old housekeeper asked God to be kind to her new employers, made arrangements for an increase in her pay, and then went nervously up to her own room.



The storm blew all night, but nothing mysterious happened. But the next morning, when the Otis family came down to breakfast, they found the terrible bloodstain on the library floor again.

'I don't think it can be the fault of Pinkerton's Wonder Stain Cleaner,' said Washington. 'I've used it for everything. It must be the ghost.'

He cleaned away the stain a second time with the little black stick, but the next morning it appeared again.

That night, Mr Otis closed all the windows, locked the library door, and carried the key upstairs. But in the morning the bloodstain was there again.

The whole family was very interested.

'Are there ghosts in the world, or aren't there?' they asked each other. They could not decide.

But that night, all doubts about the ghost left them for ever.

The day had been warm and sunny, and in the cool of the evening the family went out for a drive in the carriage. They did not return home until nine o'clock, when they had a light supper.

Their conversation did not include talk of ghosts or haunted houses, and no word was said about the dead Sir Simon de Canterville. Instead they spoke of happier things – the theatre, the actress Sarah Bernhardt, railway travel, Boston, New York, and many of the places that they had visited in America.

At eleven o'clock, they went to bed. By half-past eleven, all the lights in the house were out.

Some time later, Mr Otis was woken by a strange noise in the passage outside his room. It was the sound of metal rubbing against metal, and it seemed to come nearer to his bedroom door each minute. He lit a candle and looked at the clock on the small table next to his bed. It was exactly one o'clock.

Mr Otis was quite calm. He put a hand to his face and decided that he did not have a fever. Everything about him was quite normal.