

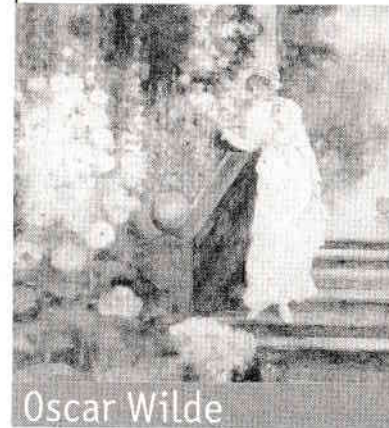
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The National Portrait Gallery.

Short Stories



Oscar Wilde

Introduction, notes and activities by

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Selection, introduction, notes and activities
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Front cover:

David Woodlock, *Lady Hamilton of Merton*.

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The Canterville Ghost



*These symbols indicate the beginning and the end
of the three stories recorded.*

I

When Mr Hiram B. Otis, the American Minister, bought Canterville Chase, every one 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 punctilious¹ 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 grand-aunt, the Dowager Duchess² 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,³ the

1. *punctilious* [pʌŋk'tɪliəs] : correct, scrupulous.
2. *Dowager* ['daʊədʒə] *Duchess* : woman holding the rank of duchess because her dead husband was a duke.
3. *parish* : area within a diocese having its own church and clergyman.

Rev. Augustus Dampier, who is a Fellow ¹ 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.'

'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 ² young fellows ³ painting the Old World red, ⁴ and carrying off your best actors and prima-donnas, I reckon ⁵ 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 ⁶ 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

1. *fellow* : member of the governing body of a college.
2. *spry* [sprai] : active, lively.
3. *fellows* : people.
4. *painting the Old World red*: 'to paint the town red' is to have a boisterous time in the bars and nightclubs, etc. of a town. Wilde transfers the idiom to the whole of the Old World, i.e. Europe.
5. *reckon* (infnl.): think.
6. *guess* (American English): think.

right. Only you must remember I warned you.'

A few weeks after this, the purchase was concluded, and at the close of the season the Minister and his family went down to Canterville Chase. Mrs Otis, who, as Miss Lucretia R. Tappen, of West 53rd Street, had been a celebrated New York belle, was now a very handsome, ¹ 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 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 ² at the Newport Casino for three successive seasons, and even in London was well known as an excellent dancer. Gardenias and the peerage ³ were his only weaknesses. Otherwise he was extremely sensible. Miss Virginia E. Otis was a little girl of fifteen, lithe ⁴ and lovely as a fawn, ⁵ and with a fine freedom in her large blue eyes. She was a wonderful amazon, ⁶ and had

1. *handsome* : used normally to describe a man but an older woman who remains good-looking in a striking way can be described as 'handsome'.
2. *German* : (here) a dance.
3. *peerage* ['piəri:dʒ] : nobility.
4. *lithe* : flexible.
5. *fawn* : young deer.
6. *amazon* : tall strong athletic woman (from the Amazons in Greek mythology).

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 huge¹ delight of the young Duke of Cheshire, who proposed for her² 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.³ They were delightful boys, and with the exception of the worthy⁴ 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 wagonette⁵ 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 pinewoods. Now and then they heard a wood pigeon brooding over its own sweet voice,⁶ or saw, deep in the rustling fern,⁷ the burnished⁸ breast of the pheasant. Little squirrels peered at them from the beech-trees as they went by, and the rabbits scudded away through the brushwood⁹ and over the

1. *huge* : enormous, immense.
2. *proposed for her* : asked to marry her (the common preposition is 'to' not 'for').
3. *the twins ... always getting swished* : 'to be swished' means to be beaten with a cane, so that the red marks made by the cane on the twins were like the stars and stripes. 'The Stars and Stripes' is the name of the American flag, so this is a play on words.
4. *worthy* ['wɜ:ði] : deserving respect.
5. *wagonette* : four-wheeled carriage.
6. *brooding over its own sweet voice* : thinking sadly about its sweet voice, presumably because one day the voice will fade or because it is singing a sad love song.
7. *rustling fern* : plant with feathery green leaves which make a gentle noise when blown by a breeze.
8. *burnished* ['bɜ:nɪʃt] : shiny.
9. *brushwood* : small trees and shrubs; undergrowth.

mossy knolls,¹ with their white tails in the air. As they entered the avenue of Canterville Chase, however, the sky became suddenly overcast with² clouds, a curious stillness seemed to hold the atmosphere, a great flight of rooks³ 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 earnest⁴ request, had consented to keep on in her former position. She made them each a low curtsey⁵ as they alighted, and said in a quaint,⁶ old-fashioned manner, 'I bid you welcome⁷ to Canterville Chase.' Following her, they passed through the fine Tudor hall into the library, a long, low room, panelled in black oak,⁸ at the end of which was a large stained-glass window.⁹ Here they found tea laid out for them, and, after taking off their wraps,¹⁰ 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

1. *knolls* [nɒʊlz] : small hills.
2. *overcast with* : made dark by.
3. *rooks* : large black birds of the crow family.
4. *earnest* ['ɜ:nɪst] : serious, solemn.
5. *curtsey* ['kɜ:tsi] : woman or girl's salutation made by bending the knees and lowering the body.
6. *quaint* : odd, unusual.
7. *I bid you welcome* : I wish you welcome.
8. *panelled in black oak* : with walls covered in panels of dark oak wood.
9. *stained-glass window* : window of coloured glass, as in a church.
10. *wraps* [ræps] : outer clothes.



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 blood-stains in a sitting-room. It must be removed at once.'

The old woman smiled, and answered in the same low, mysterious voice, 'It is the blood of Lady Eleanore de Canterville, who was murdered on that very spot by her own husband, Sir Simon de Canterville, in 1575. Sir Simon survived her nine years, and disappeared suddenly under very mysterious circumstances. His body has never been discovered, but his guilty spirit still haunts the Chase. The blood-stain has been much admired by tourists and others, and cannot be removed.'

'That is all nonsense,' cried Washington Otis; 'Pinkerton's Champion Stain Remover and Paragon Detergent¹ will clean it up in no time,' and before the terrified housekeeper could interfere he had fallen upon his knees, and was rapidly scouring the floor with a small stick of what looked like a black cosmetic. In a few moments no trace of the blood-stain could be seen.

'I knew Pinkerton would do it,' he exclaimed triumphantly, as he looked round at his admiring family; but no sooner had he said these words than a terrible flash of lightning lit up the sombre² room, a fearful peal of thunder³ made them all start to

1. *Pinkerton's ... Detergent* : in this story Wilde satirises American patent medicines and compounds. He refers here to a famous detective, Allan Pinkerton, but contemporary readers would also have been reminded of Lydia Pinkham, whose 'medicinal compound' had been advertised on the same page as Wilde's portrait in the *Washington Post*, in 1882. (Wilde was in America at that time delivering lectures.) There is a song about Lydia Pinkham, 'Lily the Pink'.

2. *sombre* ['sɒmbəɹ] : dark.

3. *peal of thunder* : loud burst of thunder.

their feet, and Mrs Umney fainted.¹

'What a monstrous climate!' said the American Minister calmly, as he lit a long cheroot.² 'I guess the old country is so over-populated that they have not enough decent weather for everybody. I have always been of opinion that emigration is the only thing for England.'

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

'Charge it to her like breakages,'³ answered the Minister, 'she won't faint after that;' and in a few moments Mrs Umney certainly came to.⁴ There was no doubt, however, that she was extremely upset,⁵ and she sternly⁶ warned Mr Otis to beware⁷ of some trouble coming to the house.

'I have seen things with my own eyes, sir,' she said, 'that would make any Christian's hair stand on end, and many and many a night I have not closed my eyes in sleep for the awful things that are done here.' Mr Otis, however, and his wife warmly assured the honest soul that they were not afraid of ghosts, and, after invoking the blessings of Providence on her new master and mistress, and making arrangements for an increase of salary, the old housekeeper tottered off to her own room.

1. *fainted* : lost consciousness.
2. *cheroot* [ʃə'ru:t] : cigar with both ends open.
3. *charge it to her like breakages* : if a servant broke something, the cost of the item would be deducted from his/her pay. Mr Otis suggests a deduction should be made from Mrs Umney's pay because, while she is unconscious, she cannot work.
4. *came to* : regained consciousness.
5. *upset* : disturbed emotionally.
6. *sternly* : severely.
7. *beware* [br'weəɪ] of : be careful about.



II

The storm raged¹ fiercely all that night, but nothing of particular note occurred. The next morning, however, when they came down to breakfast, they found the terrible stain of blood once again on the floor. 'I don't think it can be the fault of the Paragon Detergent,' said Washington, 'for I have tried it with everything. It must be the ghost.' He accordingly² rubbed out the stain a second time, but the second morning it appeared again. The third morning also it was there, though the library had been locked up at night by Mr Otis himself, and the key carried upstairs. The whole family were now quite interested; Mr Otis began to suspect that he had been too dogmatic in his denial of the existence of ghosts, Mrs Otis expressed her intention of joining the Psychical Society,³ and Washington prepared a long letter to Messrs. Myers and Podmore on the subject of the Permanence of Sanguineous Stains when connected with Crime. That night all doubts about the

1. *raged* : continued violently.
2. *accordingly* : for this reason.
3. *Psychical Society* : would be concerned with contacting the dead.

objective existence of phantasmata¹ were removed for ever.

The day had been warm and sunny; and, in the cool of the evening, the whole family went out to drive. They did not return home till nine o'clock, when they had a light supper. The conversation in no way turned upon ghosts, so there were not even those primary conditions of receptive expectation which so often precede the presentation of psychical phenomena. The subjects discussed, as I have since learned from Mr Otis, were merely such as form the ordinary conversation of cultured Americans of the better class, such as the immense superiority of Miss Fanny Davenport² over Sarah Bernhardt as an actress; the difficulty of obtaining green corn, buckwheat cakes,³ and hominy,⁴ even in the best English houses; the importance of Boston⁵ in the development of the world-soul; the advantages of the baggage check system in railway travelling; and the sweetness of the New York accent as compared to the London drawl.⁶ No mention at all was made of the supernatural, nor was Sir Simon de Canterville alluded to in any way. At eleven o'clock the family retired, and by half-past all the lights were out. Some time after, Mr Otis was awakened by a curious noise in the corridor, outside his room. It sounded like the clank⁷ of metal, and seemed to be coming nearer every moment. He got up at once, struck a match,

1. *phantasmata* : plural of 'phantasma': ghosts, ghostly appearances.
2. *Miss Fanny Davenport* : an actress much admired in America in the 1880s, but not generally considered comparable to Sarah Bernhardt, who was much more famous.
3. *buckwheat cakes* : 'buckwheat' is a plant, the flour of which is used to make cakes in America. Its seeds are used to feed animals in Europe.
4. *hominy* ['hɒ:məni] (American English): ground maize.
5. *Boston* : Wilde is satirising the cultural pretensions of Boston.
6. *drawl* : slow, lazy manner of speaking.
7. *clank* : used to describe the sound of metal striking something.