


NAXOS
AudioBooks

Charles Dickens • M.R. James

Classic Ghost Stories

The Signal-Man • The Mezzotint and others

Read by **by Stephen Critchlow**

CLASSIC
FICTION



NA245912D

1	The Signal-Man by Charles Dickens	5:23
2	In me, he merely saw a man who...	5:11
3	In a word, I should have set this man down...	5:00
4	I ran on into the tunnel...	5:36
5	He resumed.	4:55
6	When I saw him in this state...	6:39
7	Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad by M.R. James	5:55
8	In repeating the above dialogue...	5:53
9	By the time Parkins had made sure...	4:50
10	Why, surely there were marks on it...	4:21
11	The next stage was that Parkins shut his eyes...	5:47
12	Parkins set forth, with a stern determination...	5:06
13	As they turned the corner of the house...	6:52
14	By some unfortunate accident...	7:41

15	The Mezzotint by M.R. James	5:30
16	The whole thing gave the impression...	4:53
17	The picture lay face upwards on the table...	6:34
18	In a short time he had returned...	4:58
19	There was nothing for it but to spend the evening...	4:57
20	To Be Taken With a Grain of Salt by Charles Dickens	5:09
21	They were one behind the other.	5:07
22	I was not very comfortable that night.	4:42
23	I was chosen to be the Foreman of the Jury.	6:15
24	It will be borne in mind...	7:54
25	Rats by M.R. James	6:02
26	The room facing his was undistinguished...	4:04
27	Nevertheless, as the end of his stay drew near...	5:19

Total time: 2:30:51

Cover picture: Rain, steam and speed – The Great Western Railway,
William Turner (1775-1851). Courtesy AKG Images, London

Charles Dickens • M.R. James

Classic Ghost Stories

Perhaps you have heard of the warning 'Not suitable for those of a nervous disposition'. This collection of ghost stories written by the masters of their craft, are guaranteed to give your disposition a thorough shaking up. Charles Dickens's volume of work is so prolific and enduringly popular, it is difficult to know where to begin. Looking at his supernatural offerings, he did of course pen the most famous ghost story of all, *A Christmas Carol*. In that story, and *The Signal-Man*, he employs a very popular idea of the time. That of using his spectres as ghostly prophets, foreshadowing some terrible event that the central character tumbles helplessly towards. The signal-man has the unnerving feeling of being 'a pawn in a higher game' and Dickens keeps us guessing at the state of the poor man's mental health, there in his desolate outpost, right until the very end.

It was written as one of the stories for

the extra Christmas number of his magazine *All Year Round* for 1866.

The previous year Dickens himself had been involved in a terrible rail accident at Staplehurst in Kent and spent many hours tending the dead and dying.

He, along with M.R. James, make the heroes of their pieces serious and studious fellows. Men 'shut up within narrow limits' with no time in their lives for phantoms and ghoulish flights of fancy, until they are forced to experience the unthinkable at first hand.

Dickens's own father was a clerk in a Naval Pay Office and this kind of role, like the signal-man and also the dissatisfied bank worker, in *To Be Taken With a Grain of Salt*, gives his characters a meticulous and mundane quality. He also has his destiny plucked from his hands by an unseen force, and can do little but watch the grim events unfold before his eyes.

Dickens himself had little time for mystics, fortune tellers and the like, but as

an editor and writer he could completely immerse himself in the Gothic tradition of ghost stories and illicit, what he describes in *To Be Taken With a Grain of Salt* as a ‘peculiar shiver’ from his reader.

His use of location for *The Signal-Man* sets the scene eerily. ‘The clammy stone’, The tunnel mouth having a ‘barbarous, depressing and forbidding air’. He describes the wind on the telegraph wires as ‘a wild harp’ and the whole backdrop causes the narrator to observe ‘it struck chill to me, as if I had left the natural world’. The tale plays on the Victorians’ fascination with the supernatural, rebelling against the meteoric rise of industrialization, and the unknown realms of advancing technology.

Also, why, in the midst of all his rich, flamboyant character names, Gradgrind, M’Choakumchild, Scrooge and Heap does he choose to leave his ghostly protagonists anonymous? Perhaps it adds a reality, and gives his sufferers an everyman aspect – the possibility that these dreadful events could happen to anyone.

Montague Rhodes James was the son

of an East Anglican clergyman and was a brilliant linguist, medievalist and biblical scholar. He became Vice Chancellor of Cambridge University and Provost of Eton College. As if this wasn’t enough, he became the best known and ardent supplier of supernatural tales in the English language. His influence is felt from H.P. Lovecraft, and Arthur Machen, to present day writers such as Clive Barker.

There are approximately forty of his chilling fables (some incomplete) published between 1904 and 1931. His writing, and that of his contemporary Sheridan Le Fanu (whom he greatly admired), encompassed a wide variety of places and times – from the decidedly Victorian *A Warning To The Curious* to others reaching as far back as the 17th century, such as *Martin’s Close*.

In his three offerings for this collection, he uses his extensive knowledge of university life to create an environment of dusty, hushed corridors and ancient, foreboding architecture. His professors are retiring and cocooned, with little experience of the world outside their halls and cloisters.

James is the master of detail and location, his tales have an uncanny authenticity to them, as if the narrators are relating true stories, as described to them. He can turn everyday items into objects of terror. A picture, a whistle, even a doll's house. All this interest in the macabre seemed to stem back to his childhood, when he liked to collect stories about the martyrdom of saints. The more gruesome, the better.

As James himself said '...the ghost should be malevolent or odious. Amiable and helpful apparitions are all very well in fairy tales or in local legends, but I have no use for them in a fictitious ghost story'. James balanced his two passions, archeology and religion perfectly. He seemed to spend most of his academic life engaged in travel and research, then channeling these discoveries into his stories. A fitting example of this is *Oh, Whistle and I'll Come To You My Lad*. Written in 1903 and his earliest, (with the possible exception of Count Magus) ghost story. It's precise, stubbornly skeptical professor dabbles in some amateur archeology and stumbles upon an ancient

pagan preceptory. Where the discovery of a Latin inscribed bronze whistle unleashes a timeless Horror. *The Mezzotint* is another fine example of his use of creeping suspense and place. Finally with *Rats*, it is hard to believe this tale was written more than twenty five years after his first. His imagination and vision remains as strong as ever.

James said of his own work, 'If any of them succeed in causing their readers to feel pleasantly uncomfortable when walking along a solitary road at night fall, or sitting over a dying fire in the small hours, my purpose in writing them will have been attained'.

Notes by Stephen Critchlow

**The music on this recording is taken from
the NAXOS catalogue**

- VIEUXTEMPS** ELEGIE FOR VIOLA AND PIANO Op. 30 8.555262
Roberto Diaz, Viola / Robert Koenig, Piano
- VIEUXTEMPS** CAPRICCIO FOR VIOLA SOLO, Op. post., No 9 8.555262
Roberto Diaz, Viola / Robert Koenig, Piano
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Laurent Korcia, Violin / Orchestre Symphonique et Lyrique de Nancy /
Jérôme Kaltenbach

Music programmed by Roy McMillan

Charles Dickens • M.R. James

Classic Ghost Stories

The Signal-Man • The Mezzotint and others

Read by **Stephen Critchlow**

Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You My Lad, remains one of the most read and truly unnerving ghost stories ever written and this, along with many others were recited by James himself, (as was the tradition every Christmas) to the pupils of The King's College Choir School. Hopefully by a crackling fire, a few flickering candles, and not too much wind! These tales, above all, are spine tingling and thoroughly ripping yarns. So sit back by the light of your flickering candle and enjoy. Your disposition may never be the same again.



Stephen is a popular and versatile actor who has enjoyed a wide variety of work. Including *Hamlet* and *Pygmalion* in The West End, *Cyrano De Bergerac* at The Royal National Theatre and playing Kenneth Horne in *Round The Horne Revisited on Tour*. Television and film work includes *Cider with Rosie*, *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, *The Prince and The Pauper*, *Heartbeat*, *Monarch of the Glen*, *Fantabulosa*, *Trial and Retribution*, *The Calcium Kid* and *Churchill The Hollywood Years*. He has been in over two hundred productions as a member of the BBC Radio Drama Company and has recorded William Blake poetry for Naxos AudioBooks.

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