

Spotlight Publications

The Canterville Ghost

**A play with music
From the story by Oscar Wilde
Dramatised by Peter Bond**



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THE CANTERVILLE GHOST

From the story by Oscar Wilde
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This dramatisation can be performed as a straight play with no songs, in which case it will be a one-act play, lasting about 50 minutes. Alternatively, it can be performed as a musical in two acts, and (depending how many songs are used) will last up to 90 minutes. The songs are shown in the Producer's Notes at the end.

Characters:

Sir Simon de Canterville (the Ghost)
Lady Eleanore de Canterville (non-speaking part)
Mr Umney, the butler
Mrs Umney, the housekeeper
Thomas, a servant
Catherine, a servant
Hiram B. Otis, an American politician and writer
Mrs Lavinia Otis, his wife
Virginia Otis, their daughter, aged 17
Washington Otis, their son, aged about 14
Jefferson Otis, their son, aged about 13
The Duke of Cheshire, aged 17

Time - late Victorian England

Scene

The scene throughout is a drawing-room at Canterville Chase. The exit left leads to the front door and to the servants' quarters; the exit right leads to the interior of the house. There should also be a concealed exit in the panelling which the Ghost uses. If possible, a French window, centre, provides an additional exit as well as giving the characters a view of the grounds. There is an engraved tablet near the window (which the audience won't be able to read at that distance). There are portraits of ancestors around the walls, one of which shows Sir Simon de Canterville

(the Ghost), who may look either very sinister or amusingly roguish, according to preference. Another portrait shows a judge. There is a bookcase with some ancient books. There is a wooden table with two upright chairs. Depending on the size of the stage, there may also be two armchairs. There is a bell for summoning the servants – this can be either a normal bell-push or a hanging that can be pulled.

PROLOGUE

(Performed without words)

The year: 1471. Spotlight on the table and chairs, so that the rest of the scene is not visible

Sir Simon de Canterville sits at the table, eating. He is in armour or possibly robes with a sword at his side. Enter Lady Eleanore de Canterville right. She moves towards Sir Simon, to see if he is enjoying his food. She looks at him affectionately. Sir Simon spits out some food. He looks at Lady Eleanore in annoyance. He throws his plate away. Then he rises from his chair and draws his sword. Lady Eleanore screams. Sir Simon seizes her and is about to stab her. Blackout. Some further sound effects – screams, body falling out of window etc. – may be added, if desired

ACT 1

Scene 1

The year: 1889. Afternoon, full stage lighting

Mr Umney stands on a stepladder, dusting a portrait of a judge. Mrs Umney is dusting furniture with feather duster

Umney Is the cobweb quite removed, Mrs Umney?

Mrs Umney Completely, Mr Umney. I'm sure you don't need to worry.

Umney *(descending the ladder)* There shall be no cobwebs in this house while I am in charge. *(With a glance at the portrait)* Even on a judge.

Mrs Umney Our new employers will never notice, Mr Umney. They're only Americans. They're called Otis. *(She says "Otis" as if the name is an indication of all that is possibly wrong with America)*

Umney This is an English house, Mrs Umney. The English aristocracy may have fallen on hard times and been forced to abandon their ancestral home, but the servants of Canterville Chase shall still maintain the highest standards. Even when serving mere colonials.

Mrs Umney They may be very nice people, Mr Umney. I've heard that Americans are very generous.

Umney The Americans have a curious belief that generosity buys forgiveness for mistakes. As Americans make so many more mistakes than other nations, it proves highly expensive.

Mrs Umney They have been very kind to us already, Mr Umney. They have retained you and me and all of Lord Canterville's staff in their employment. They could have dismissed us and employed a staff of Americans.

Umney They will need all of Lord Canterville's staff and more if they are to maintain this house as the premier stately home in Surrey. *(Change Surrey to local county if preferred)* We wouldn't wish to see it decline and become... *(with clear disapproval)* ...a tourist attraction.

Mrs Umney No. *(Sadly)* I don't suppose they'll stay here long in any case.

Umney *(pause. Then, ominously)* No, I don't suppose they will. No. Nobody stays here long.

Some discordant notes are heard on a piano offstage. Then a girl screams

Mrs Umney *(alert and worried)* Did you hear that?

Mr Umney comes away from his stepladder. He is about to investigate the scream - but stops as he hears a few more notes on the piano. Then two servants, Thomas and Catherine, rush in R. Catherine is in a state of panic

Mrs Umney What's the matter, my dear?

Catherine It wasn't me who played the piano, Mrs Umney. Honest it wasn't. There was nobody near it. *(She dissolves in tears)*

Umney You don't need to cry, my girl. There's nothing to worry about.

Mrs Umney *(trying to cheer her up)* Cheer up, my dear. Tell us what happened.

Catherine is unable to speak, so Thomas explains

Thomas We were dusting the green drawing room – as you told us, Mrs Umney – and the grand piano started playing – all by itself.

Umney *(dramatically)* It was the notes of doom.

Catherine What do you mean?

Umney The notes of doom portend a death at Canterville Chase.

Thomas Death for who?

Umney Nobody knows. Except the Ghost.

Catherine The Ghost? What Ghost?

Umney Did no one tell you about the Ghost? You should have been warned about him when you were first employed here.

Catherine No, Mr Umney. No one said anything about a ghost.

Mr Umney points to the portrait of Sir Simon de Canterville

Umney The Ghost has haunted these rooms for over four hundred years. He is the ghost of Sir Simon de Canterville.

Mr Umney now explains the history of the Ghost. This can be done either in song –

Song 1

See Producer's Notes

or in the following dialogue (or even both):

Catherine What happened?

Umney *(dramatically)* Sir Simon de Canterville was the fourth owner of this house. He was the great-grandson of Sir Roger de Canterville who was honoured by Henry the Fifth for his gallantry at the Battle of Agincourt, in which he reputedly killed seventeen French knights single-handed and took prisoner two dukes, three viscounts and an archbishop. Sir Roger was rewarded by the King by being granted the land to build this magnificent house. But Sir Simon, his descendant, was a very different sort of man. The tales of his cruelty filled every decent person in the neighbourhood with horror; an account of his crimes would fill a medium-sized volume. *(He walks to the bookshelf and picks out a book)*. In fact, the eleventh Lady Canterville wrote just such a book. *(Even more dramatically)* But the crime for which he will always be remembered and reviled was the murder - of his wife.

All No! Why?

Mrs Umney She was a sweet, young girl. She was too good for a monster like Sir Simon.

Umney He killed her because... *(dramatic pause)*...he didn't like her cooking.

All *(shocked)* No!

Umney For nine years the murderer lived on here in Canterville Chase, alone with his guilty conscience. Then, one day, he disappeared. Nobody knows what happened. Nobody knows how or why he died. Nobody even knows what happened to his body, for he was never seen again. *(Pause)* At least, not in the flesh.

All look at Mr Umney for an explanation of his last remark

Since then, his wicked soul has found no rest. For three hundred years, he has haunted these chambers, bringing distress and death to all whom he has encountered. Many people have seen him once. I have seen him myself. It is not an experience one can forget although, God knows, one tries to put it out of one's mind. *(Another pause)* No one who has seen him twice has lived to tell the tale.

As the song ends, or as the dialogue above finishes, there are sounds of horses' hooves and a carriage arriving

Thomas That's the carriage. They're here!

Umney Catherine! Thomas! Out at once to welcome the Otis family and take their luggage. We must give them a proper welcome to Canterville Chase.

Everyone hurries out L purposefully. Various sounds of doors opening and closing, luggage being put down etc. Then Mrs Otis strides in L, followed by Hiram B. Otis, Virginia, Washington and Jefferson. Mrs and Mrs Umney come soon after, followed by Thomas and Catherine. The four servants are all carrying items of luggage

Mrs Otis Isn't this just divine?

Virginia Mother, it's beautiful.

Otis Well, I'll be doggoned. I said you two would love this place the minute you set eyes on it.

Washington Gee whiz, Pop, what a crazy place.

Jefferson Sure is, Pop.

Otis (to Mr and Mrs Umney) I figure you two are Mr and Mrs Umney?

Umney (with a slight bow of the head) You figure correctly, Sir.

Mrs Umney (with a curtsey) Sir. Madam. We bid you welcome to Canterville Chase.

Otis That's grand. I'm Hiram B. Otis and this is my wife, Mrs Lavinia Otis. And my children – Virginia B. Otis, Washington B. Otis, Jefferson B. Otis.

Mrs Umney You are all very welcome to Canterville Chase.

Lots of hand-shaking. All the Otises shake hands with Mr and Mrs Umney and Thomas and Catherine. Thomas and Catherine are a little surprised by the honour

Umney If you are ready, Sir and Madam, tea is served in the green drawing room. Would you care to follow me

-

Otis Afternoon tea. That's perfect. Thank you, Mr Umney.

Mrs Otis Mr Umney, this is a quiet, peaceful house, isn't it?

Umney (in some confusion) Er – yes – er – of course it is, in its way, madam.

Mrs Otis You see, my husband is researching for his book on the English feudal system and its impact on American history from the Pilgrim Fathers to George Washington.

Umney A topic of unending fascination, Sir.

Washington (ironic) It's going to be a best-seller.

Otis And I need peace and quiet for my research.

Mrs Umney I'm sure no one will disturb you, Sir. Hardly anyone ever comes here. If you'd like to follow me -

Mr Umney starts to lead off R, with all the Otises following. But Mrs Otis stops abruptly

Mrs Otis Mrs Umney! What has been spilt here?

Mrs Umney It is blood, Madam.

Mrs Otis I cannot have bloodstains in a sitting room. Have it removed at once.

Mrs Umney It cannot be removed, Madam. It has been there for four hundred years.

Mrs Otis Has the floor not been cleaned in all that time?

Mrs Umney It is the blood of Lady Eleanore de Canterville. She was murdered on that very spot by her wicked husband, Sir Simon de Canterville, in 1471. The blood has remained there ever since.

Mrs Otis Four hundred years! It will be a seething mass of bacteria.

Umney Mrs Umney is quite correct, Madam. The stain cannot be removed. We leave it as it is now; it is the object of much admiration from visitors.

Otis That stain's not four hundred years old. It's quite recent

Umney Sir Simon revisits the scene of his crime every night, Sir, to keep the memory of it fresh.

Otis You just said the crime happened in 1471. This guy you mention - Sir Simon de Canterville?– must have been dead for quite some time. He can't visit anybody.

Umney When you arranged to buy the estate, Sir, did Lord Canterville not mention to you that the Chase is haunted?

Washington Aw, that's nonsense.

Jefferson No, it isn't. A ghost is cool. I bet no one else at school has a ghost in their house.

Otis We bought the ghost along with the furniture and the effects. I'm looking forward to meeting him.

Umney Sir, the Ghost always makes an appearance before the death of a family member.

Mrs Otis So does the family doctor!

Umney And that member of the family always dies in unspeakable agony.

Mrs Umney I have seen things with my own eyes, madam, that would make any Christian's hair stand on end. And as for the things that are done here in the night...

Mrs Otis We shall see. I am going to deal with this stain. Pinkerton's Champion Stain Remover will clean it up right away.

Umney Pinkerton's Champion Stain Remover? Would that be an American brand, madam?

Mrs Otis It sure would. Unbeatable value at fifty cents a bottle. I have one right here.

She finds a small bottle amongst her hand-luggage

Song 2

See Producer's Notes

Mrs Otis goes down on her knees and scrubs the stain. Everyone watches tensely, especially Mrs Umney, who stands in an attitude of prayer. At last Mrs Otis stands up, triumphant

Mrs Otis There! I knew Pinkerton would do it!

Thunder and lightning. Amazement and horror from almost all. Mrs Umney faints into Mr Umney's arms. Washington and Jefferson, however, are looking excited

Scene 2

Night-time. Total blackout. Sounds of chains clanking, horrible groans and eerie laughter. Then we hear Mr Otis and Mrs Otis

Mrs Otis Hiram, you're snoring.

Otis No I'm not. Go back to sleep.

More creaks, clangs, groans, laughs etc. Then a spotlight follows the Ghost as he enters through the panelling, looks around, and walks slowly across right. Before going out, he stops and looks at the audience and laughs horribly