

The Haunted Tale
Of James O'Neil

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FADE IN:

INT. INN - NIGHT

JAMES O'NEIL, a blond man in his forties, has dinner in an inn. Well-dressed with a military cape like any 18th century wealthy army officer, he pushes aside his empty plate and sips a pint of beer.

The place is quiet, cozy. People speak softly.

The door opens and ALAN, a man in his thirties, enters.

He looks in a hurry and scans quickly the place. His eyes meet James and he paces to his table.

He sits facing James who looks up to him, surprised.

JAMES
What's the Hell--

ALAN
Forgive me Sir. Are you James
O'Neil?

James nods.

ALAN
I've been looking for you all
over the town. Your servant told
me you were here.

JAMES
Who are you?

ALAN
My name is Alan. You used to know
my father, Lord Ashley.

JAMES
Good heavens. I remember him. He
always treated me like his own
son. How is he?

ALAN
He died three years ago.

James is about to talk.

ALAN
But that's not the reason why I'm
here. My father always talked
about you as a sensible man.

James frowns.

ALAN

That is why I need you. You're
the only man who could help me.

James sips his beer, gazing at the young man with interest.

ALAN

Having fallen madly in love with a
young girl, I had married her, but
after a year of happiness, she died
suddenly of an affection of the
heart. I left the town on the very
day of her burial and came back
yesterday.

JAMES

Do you want to share a beer with
me?

ALAN

(agitated)

Since I have found you, I will ask
you to render me an important
service. It's to go and get me out
of the desk in my bedroom-- our
bedroom-- some papers of which I
have urgent need. I cannot send a
servant or a business clerk, as
discretion is necessary. As for
myself, nothing on earth would
induce me to reenter that house.
Just tell my gardener, to open the
manor for you.

James looks amused.

JAMES

That is all?

ALAN

You must take two packages of
letters and a roll of papers from
the first right-hand drawer of the
desk, of which I had the key.

He puts a silver key on the table.

ALAN

I need not beg you to refrain
from glancing at them.

JAMES

Of course not.

ALAN

And a letter for my gardener.

By the silver key, he puts a sealed envelop.

ALAN
I'll meet you here tomorrow
morning at ten.

Intrigued and amused, James smiles as Alan flees out of the inn.

James takes the silver key in his hand, stares at it, and raises his head to the counter.

JAMES
(hailing)
Another beer!

EXT. MANSION - NIGHT

Lighted by a full moon, the manor looks as if it had been abandoned for years.

However, through a small window, he can see the dim light of a candle.

James dismounts his horse and ties the rein to a branch.

As he passes the open gate, James sees it is falling from its hinges, the walks are overgrown with grass and the flower beds are no longer distinguishable.

James reaches the door and bangs on the wood.

After a while, the door opens and an OLD MAN opens. His severe eyes gazes at James. He holds a candelabra.

James hands him the envelop.

Suspicious, the old man breaks the seal, opens the letter, and reads it. He looks up and down at James.

OLD MAN
Well, what is it you wish?

JAMES
You ought to know, since you have just read your master's orders. I wish to enter the manor.

OLD MAN
Then you are going in-- into her room?

JAMES
Damn it! Are you presuming to question me?

OLD MAN
(stammering in
confusion)
No-- Sir-- but-- it has not been
opened since-- since the death.
If you will be kind enough to
wait five minutes I will go and--
and see if--

JAMES
(impatient)
See here, what do you mean by
your tricks? You know very well
you cannot enter the room, since
here is the key!

OLD MAN
Then, sir, I will show you the
way.

JAMES
Show me the staircase and leave
me. I'll find my way without you.

OLD MAN
But-- Sir-- indeed--

Losing patience, James grabs the candelabra, pushes the old man aside, and enters the manor.

INT. MANOR - NIGHT

Lighted by the candles, James crosses a large hall, mounts a staircase and faces a door.

He slides the key, turns it, and the door opens.

BEDROOM

James enters a large and disordered bedroom.

Scanning the room, he sees a bed without sheets but still retaining its mattresses and pillows, on one of which was a deep impression, as though an elbow or a head had recently rested there.

On the back, James notices that a door, doubtless that of a closet, had remained half open.

James walks to the writing desk where he puts the candelabra.

His shadow is cast on the walls by the light of the candles.

James sits in an armchair and, letting down the lid of the desk, he opens the drawer.

It is full to the top.

He starts searching.

The flames of the candles bend for a short while.

James pays no attention, keeping rummaging. He finds the letters and the roll of papers he puts on the desk and stiffens as he turns his head.

A tall YOUNG WOMAN with blonde hair and pale face, dressed in white, stands gazing at him by the back door.

James stands up, walks back, and sticks his back against the drawn curtains. Though he first looks terrified, he tries to maintain a bold front.

YOUNG WOMAN

(whispering)

Oh, sir, you can render me a great service.

James tries to speak but only a vague sound comes from his throat.

YOUNG WOMAN

(whispering)

Will you? You can save me, cure me then. I suffer frightfully. I suffer. Oh! How I suffer!

She slowly sits in the armchair, still looking at James.

YOUNG WOMAN

(whispering)

Will you?

James nods nervously in assent. She holds out to him a tortoise-shell comb.

YOUNG WOMAN

(whispering)

Comb my hair, that will cure me. It must be combed. Look at my head-- how I suffer. And my hair pulls so!

James slowly stands behind her and starts to comb her blonde hair.

He twists, knots, and unknots, and braids them.

The young woman sighs, bows her head, and draws a sad smile.

YOUNG WOMAN
(whispering)
Thank you.

She snatches the comb from James' hands and flees by the back door.

Left alone, James grabs the candelabra and springs to the door by which the young woman left.

The door is closed and immovable.

James picks the papers, runs from the room --

MANOR

-- dashes down the stairs four steps at a time, runs through the empty hall, and flees outside.

EXT. MANSION - NIGHT

James sprints in the alley, crosses the gate, takes the reins, leaps into the saddle, and gallops away in the full moon night.

INT. JAMES' MASTER BEDROOM - NIGHT

James lies in his bed, tossing right and left, unable to find some sleep.

On the table, at the foot of the bed, the letters and the roll of papers from the manor.

INT. INN - DAY

James sits at the same table in the inn. On the table, by his hand, the letters and the roll.

Impatient, he takes his pocket watch out and checks the time: 12 AM.

James turns to the door of the inn, but no one comes in.

He stands up and walks out of the inn.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Though the daylight, a light mist rises above the forest ground.

On his horse, James rides quietly on a path. He looks lost.

Reaching a crossroad, he notices an old wall.

Following the wall, he finally sights the manor gate.

He dismounts his horse and ties the rein to the branch like the night before.

EXT. MANSION - DAY

James walks to the gate and stops.

He faces a wrecked building, destroyed by fire many years ago, half covered by the mist.

James scans around.

This the same gate falling from its hinges. The walks are still overgrown with grass and the flower beds are no longer distinguishable.

He walks back to his horse, opens the saddlebag, and takes the letters out.

On everyone of them, the same feminine handwriting. They are all sent to Alan Ashley with an official stamp that announces: RETURN TO SENDER.

James frowns, puts the letters back into the saddlebag, and takes the roll of papers.

He unrolls it and starts to read.

This is a last will in favour of James Lloyd Ashley, son of Alan and Louise Ashley.

James notices a line where it's written:

"Because of his mother's madness, little James has to be left in Father Oliver's care."

FLASHBACK - COVENT COURTYARD - DAY

The sun is high in the sky.

A little boy with blond hair - James is 5-year old - is walking in a covent courtyard by monk, FATHER OLIVER.

The monk reads the Bible to James.

END OF
FLASHBACK:

EXT. MANSION - DAY

James freezes.

He turns to the manor.

Through the mist, he spots two crosses through the high grass.

The papers in hand, James walks over to find two gravestones where he stops.

On one knee, he pushes away the grass and the leaves off the headstones.

Two names are carved:

ALAN ASHLEY

LOUISE ASHLEY

A draft sweeps James' face.

He lowers his head and looks at his military vest.

One of the long blond hair of the young woman is caught on a golden button.

His eyes catch another part of the will:

"He will inherit the Ashley family fortune..."

FADE OUT:

The end