

# M·R·JAMES *and the* LORD WARDEN HOTEL

by Sherifa Rashidally

Ghost stories, abbeys, churches and castles - what more could conjure up a perfect description of M. R. James! MRJ, as he was known to his associates, was born Montague Rhodes James in 1862 at Goodnestone near Wingham, Kent the son of a clergyman and destined to become one of the great English writers of ghost stories. A collection of such stories without one by MRJ would simply not do! He was the quintessential writer of stories that revolved around old manor houses, deserted seashores and the crumbled ruins of old abbeys and churches.

However, MRJ was also a revered authority on abbeys, churches and castles, having written many books on lovely old and historic buildings. One such book entitled *Abbeys*, written in 1925 and published by the Great Western Railway of Paddington, London, was quite superb, showing all the abbeys and cathedrals on the route from Paddington to the West Country and Wales. A map showing these and castles on this route is included in a pocket at the back of the book. Recently I was most fortunate enough to acquire a copy

Though MRJ was a son of Kent he moved with his parents, his two brothers and a sister, to Suffolk while still in his childhood. He was educated

at Temple Grove preparatory school then at Eton from 1876 to 1882. When at King's College he took a first and in due course became Fellow, Dean, Tutor and in 1905 a Provost. In 1895 he had been awarded a D.Litt. degree, and had published his first catalogues, manuscripts and, in magazine form, two ghost stories *Canon Alberic's Scrapbook* (spooky to say the least!) and *Lost Hearts*.

In 1904 *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* a collection of eight stories, which included his first two, appeared. Many more of his works followed, not only ghost stories but also on abbeys, churches and castles. There was *The Five Jars* a fantasy for children (1922), a book on his recollections of Eton and King's (1926), one on Suffolk and Norfolk (1930), and a translation of forty Hans Christian Andersen stories (1930), for MRJ was proficient in the Danish language. In that same year, 1930, he received the Order of Merit, for earlier in 1918 he had accepted the Provostship of Eton, the place so close to his heart.

MRJ frequently visited the continent including visits to St.Wulfram's Church at Abbeville in France which is mentioned in his famous ghost story *Casting the Runes*. Incidentally in 1957 this was made into a film entitled *Curse of the Demon* (*Night of*

the Demon in the UK). It was on these visits to the continent that MRJ stayed at the Lord Warden hotel, which, as those familiar with Dover know, has accommodated many of the famous on their way to and from England and the continent.

MRJ died in 1936 but his stories live on. They are unique in that sometimes only a bleary or vaguely described figure or image conjures up more fear than if it had been described with more clarity of form. Surely things half-hidden and shapes not clear make the mind wonder what

dreadful objects they really could be and it is this which makes MRJ such a master of the classic ghost story. Moreover, it is we from Dover who can add yet one more of the famous to our list of those who stayed at the Lord Warden.

Though he spent his childhood in Suffolk and travelled far and wide might we not think that when MRJ stayed at this Dover hotel and looked across towards the lighthouse, with its shadows on a foggy night, this must have conjured up a perfect theme for the ghosts of antiquity!

\* \* \* \* \*

## *Zeebrugge Service on St George's Day*



Photographs by Mike McFarnell