

Dr. Gingrich The Mystery of George Cataract
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As dusk set in, the area around the swampland glistened with the setting sun, casting gloomy shadows crisscrossing over the dewy plains. The old castle, once brimming with activity and life, sunk one more inch into the muck of the swamp, as it had done every night since it was abandoned hundreds of years ago. Its turrets seemed to sag with the weight of neglect, the windows currently without glass stood open to the night like several open sores, the darkness within hiding everything so as not to disturb the castle's secrets.

To the little village just over a hill from the swampland, the castle held all kinds of secrets that were better left alone. However, one elderly man lived on the top of a hill on the outskirts of town, where he could see the castle and the little village from opposite ends of his modest abode, as if he could hardly decide to which side he belonged more. The castle often beckoned to him, George Cataract, offering a cloud of dark mystery and the scars of age that he most identified with the deep wrinkles on his own face. The village, on the other hand, stood for the innocence and youth he couldn't come to grips with giving up.

The village adults held George in high esteem because he was the eldest in the town and was the most familiar with the local area and history. They often came to him for advice in buying property and managing their farms and businesses. He always readily gave his thoughts on the matter at hand and then entertained them with quaint little stories of the village at a time before they were born. He was also the town's only confectioner and even the adults liked to secretly enjoy his famous peppermint sticks from time to time. Even though they immensely enjoyed his company, they often pitied the fact that he lived alone and so far from the town's center. Often the kind women would encourage him to move, so that he did not have such a distinct view of the gruesome swamp and the ugly castle that they tried so hard to forget about. But to him, the castle was one of the main things that kept his mind alive. Its mysteries gripped him like an iron fist, daring him to come closer and find out what lay inside. Even though he often desired it, he had never gathered enough courage to actually venture inside the castle.

Many a night George awoke to a rapping on his door, the sound of a few little hands making just enough noise as to rouse an old man from his sleep. He would put on his dressing gown and open the door, lighting several candles on the way and clearing space on his floor. From the glow of the candles he could see several of the small village children, both thrilled and frightened by the fact that they had snuck out of their homes after hours to hear old Mr. Cataract's chilling tales of the monsters and witches of long ago while sucking on their favorite candy. He was renowned among the children of the village somewhat because he gave out free candy, but mostly because of his frightening stories. To these children, as to George, the castle just visible by the light of the moon held their terrible curiosity and was the perfect setting for all bloodcurdling tales.

Most of them he created to entertain their vivid imaginations, but one night he remembered a story he had heard as a child, a story his father told him was the real mystery of Cumberland Castle. He decided to share the tale with his enthralled little listeners:

"Long ago, it was said, even farther back in time than the settling of our village or the formation of the swamp, a brilliantly happy noble family resided in Cumberland Castle. They spent their summers there, hunting in a lush forest and swimming in a little lake, enjoying all the benefits of summertime. But one night, a dark and mysterious wind blew over the castle, bringing with it the curse of disease and plague that killed every resident of the castle, except for one. The woman of the house, Lady Cumberland, was said to have survived the curse brought upon her family by the jealousy of a man whom she had once loved, but later rejected when Sir Cumberland had proposed to her. She knew it was he who had sought revenge on her family because he had always been jealous of Sir Cumberland. He appeared to her in fitful dream on the night of the murders, smiling insanely and ripping out the hearts of her beloved family members. She felt so much desperation after the loss of her family and animosity toward the man who had killed them that she in turn went simply psychotic and her ghost is said to still remain in the tallest of the turrets looking out over the land that had once brought her so much joy. It is told that no one who has gone to investigate the castle has ever returned because she uses her ghostly hand to coax out the intruder's soul and makes it stay with her for all eternity."

The children's faces were livid with a mixture of curiosity and terror as he wrapped up the story and sent them all home with a pat on the back and a peppermint stick. Afterwards he blew out all the candles and returned to bed, shedding his dressing gown and slipping back under the sheets.

Not long after George fell asleep for the second time he heard another small knock on his door. Guessing that one of the children had left his blanket or forgotten his way home in the dark, he opened the door without inhibition. As soon as the door swung open he felt a terrific gust of wind behind him, so strong it pushed him over the threshold of the doorway and slammed the door behind him. George fell forward but caught himself before he hit the ground. Standing up and brushing himself off, he gazed curiously around, trying to find the child that had just knocked. Not seeing anyone, he blamed the sound on the unusual wind and walked back to his door. Just then another terrific gust of wind blew him back away from his house. This time it pushed him forward, but did not let him fall as long as he walked in the direction it was blowing. George had no choice but to follow the strange wind as it carried him in one direction and the next guiding him along the hill and down to the swamp, away from the village. It almost felt like he was drifting a few centimeters off the ground as he glided over the oozing mass of the swamp beneath his feet without actually seeming to touch it. The moon was high up in the sky by that time, perhaps a little after

midnight, casting its light and shadows creepily over the castle that was growing closer and closer to George by the second. Now overtaken by his inquisitive nature, George didn't even try to fight the direction which the wind was taking him.

Soon the castle was right in front of him, looming over his small frame in a menacing way. The wind pushed him through a second-story window because the first story was completely submerged in the swamp. The smell of decaying matter filled George's nostrils as he took a step forward, his old eyes adjusting to the dark, the only light available cast by the moon. Once adjusted, his eyes could make out the outlines of large quantities of rotting furniture, including a four-poster bed and antique dresser, along with two nightstands and a huge bookshelf half filled with the rot of old novels. He walked carefully around the room, barely daring to breathe, his heart racing faster than it had in several decades. He made it his mission to investigate the entire castle and could hardly wait to tell the children new stories about what he could now see firsthand. He could almost picture their little faces glowing with excitement when they found out he himself had gone into Cumberland Castle.

Several hours later, he found himself in front of the only door he had not entered throughout the castle besides the bottom floor which was impenetrable. Gulping back his fright he carefully opened the door, knowing full-well that this was the door to the tallest turret. He told himself that he did not believe the story he told the kids that night; his father had obviously only told him the story to deter him from wanting to go to the castle when he was young and from putting his life in danger while trying to pass the swamp. He stepped cautiously up the stairway feeling the cold dampness of the stone wall brush against his arm as he walked. Once at the top there was yet another door, which he pushed open quickly, before he could think about what he was doing. Just then a scream pierced the hollow night and a figure burst from behind a couch in the little circular room that stood before him. George screamed and tried to turn around, but it was too late. The ghostly figure of a woman who seemed both delicate and dreadfully sturdy with age blinded his vision. He felt her eager hands reaching, reaching inside of his living flesh and grasping what he realized too late was his very soul.

The next day when a young farmer showed up at Mr. Cataract's house with a question about irrigation, he found the little house devoid of life. Several days later a full-scale search was launched to recover the old man whom they all held in such high esteem. The children were the most affected by the loss of their favorite adult who always had time to share with them even when their own parents did not. One night several months later they got together to discuss what had happened to their favorite storyteller. As they sat staring down the hill at the mysterious castle one little boy pointed toward the only window on the tallest of the turrets. As the rest of the children strained to see what little Bobby was pointing at, the outline of a large, ghostly peppermint stick was just visible by bright light of the moon.