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The Turn of the Screw

by Henry James

The story had held us, round the fire, sufficiently breathless,
but except the obvious remark that it was gruesome, as, on Christmas
Eve in an old house, a strange tale should essentially be,
I remember no comment uttered till somebody happened to say that it
was the only case he had met in which such a visitation had fallen
on a child. The case, I may mention, was that of an apparition
in just such an old house as had gathered us for the occasion--
an appearance, of a dreadful kind, to a little boy sleeping
in the room with his mother and waking her up in the terror of it;
waking her not to dissipate his dread and soothe him to sleep again,
but to encounter also, herself, before she had succeeded in doing so,
the same sight that had shaken him. It was this observation
that drew from Douglas--not immediately, but later in the evening--
a reply that had the interesting consequence to which I call attention.
Someone else told a story not particularly effective, which I saw
he was not following. This I took for a sign that he had himself
something to produce and that we should only have to wait.
We waited in fact till two nights later; but that same evening,

before we scattered, he brought out what was in his mind.

"I quite agree--in regard to Griffin's ghost, or whatever it was--
that its appearing first to the little boy, at so tender an age,
adds a particular touch. But it's not the first occurrence
of its charming kind that I know to have involved a child.
If the child gives the effect another turn of the screw,
what do you say to TWO children--?"

"We say, of course," somebody exclaimed, "that they give two turns!
Also that we want to hear about them."

I can see Douglas there before the fire, to which he had got up
to present his back, looking down at his interlocutor with his
hands in his pockets. "Nobody but me, till now, has ever heard.
It's quite too horrible." This, naturally, was declared by several
voices to give the thing the utmost price, and our friend,
with quiet art, prepared his triumph by turning his eyes
over the rest of us and going on: "It's beyond everything.
Nothing at all that I know touches it."

"For sheer terror?" I remember asking.

He seemed to say it was not so simple as that; to be really at a loss how to qualify it. He passed his hand over his eyes, made a little wincing grimace.

"For dreadful--dreadfulness!"

"Oh, how delicious!" cried one of the women.

He took no notice of her; he looked at me, but as if, instead of me, he saw what he spoke of. "For general uncanny ugliness and horror and pain."

"Well then," I said, "just sit right down and begin."

He turned round to the fire, gave a kick to a log, watched it an instant. Then as he faced us again: "I can't begin.

I shall have to send to town." There was a unanimous groan at this, and much reproach; after which, in his preoccupied way, he explained. "The story's written. It's in a locked drawer-- it has not been out for years. I could write to my man and enclose the key; he could send down the packet as he finds it."

It was to me in particular that he appeared to propound this-- appeared almost to appeal for aid not to hesitate.

He had broken a thickness of ice, the formation of many a winter; had had his reasons for a long silence. The others resented postponement, but it was just his scruples that charmed me.

I adjured him to write by the first post and to agree with us for an early hearing; then I asked him if the experience in question had been his own. To this his answer was prompt.

"Oh, thank God, no!"

"And is the record yours? You took the thing down?"

"Nothing but the impression. I took that HERE"--he tapped his heart.

"I've never lost it."

"Then your manuscript--?"

"Is in old, faded ink, and in the most beautiful hand." He hung fire again. "A woman's. She has been dead these twenty years. She sent me the pages in question before she died."

They were all listening now, and of course there was somebody to be arch, or at any rate to draw the inference. But if he put the inference by without a smile it was also without irritation.

"She was a most charming person, but she was ten years older than I. She was my sister's governess," he quietly said.

"She was the most agreeable woman I've ever known in her position; she would have been worthy of any whatever. It was long ago, and this episode was long before. I was at Trinity,

and I found her at home on my coming down the second summer.

I was much there that year--it was a beautiful one; and we had,

in her off-hours, some strolls and talks in the garden--

talks in which she struck me as awfully clever and nice.

Oh yes; don't grin: I liked her extremely and am glad to this day

to think she liked me, too. If she hadn't she wouldn't have told me.

She had never told anyone. It wasn't simply that she said so,

but that I knew she hadn't. I was sure; I could see.

You'll easily judge why when you hear."

"Because the thing had been such a scare?"

He continued to fix me. "You'll easily judge," he repeated:

"YOU will."

I fixed him, too. "I see. She was in love."

He laughed for the first time. "You ARE acute.

Yes, she was in love. That is, she had been. That came out--

she couldn't tell her story without its coming out.

I saw it, and she saw I saw it; but neither of us spoke of it.

I remember the time and the place--the corner of the lawn,

the shade of the great beeches and the long, hot summer afternoon.

It wasn't a scene for a shudder; but oh--!" He quitted the fire and dropped back into his chair.

"You'll receive the packet Thursday morning?" I inquired.

"Probably not till the second post."

"Well then; after dinner--"

"You'll all meet me here?" He looked us round again. "Isn't anybody going?"

It was almost the tone of hope.

"Everybody will stay!"

"_I_ will" --and "_I_ will!" cried the ladies whose departure had been fixed. Mrs. Griffin, however, expressed the need for a little more light. "Who was it she was in love with?"

"The story will tell," I took upon myself to reply.

"Oh, I can't wait for the story!"

"The story WON'T tell," said Douglas; "not in any literal, vulgar way."

"More's the pity, then. That's the only way I ever understand."

"Won't YOU tell, Douglas?" somebody else inquired.

He sprang to his feet again. "Yes--tomorrow. Now I must go to bed.

Good night." And quickly catching up a candlestick, he left us slightly bewildered. From our end of the great brown hall we heard his step on the stair; whereupon Mrs. Griffin spoke.

"Well, if I don't know who she was in love with, I know who HE was."

"She was ten years older," said her husband.

"Raison de plus--at that age! But it's rather nice, his long reticence."

"Forty years!" Griffin put in.

"With this outbreak at last."

"The outbreak," I returned, "will make a tremendous occasion of Thursday night;" and everyone so agreed with me that,

in the light of it, we lost all attention for everything else.

The last story, however incomplete and like the mere opening of a serial, had been told; we handshook and "candlestuck," as somebody said, and went to bed.

I knew the next day that a letter containing the key had, by the first post, gone off to his London apartments; but in spite of--or perhaps just on account of--the eventual diffusion of this knowledge we quite let him alone till after dinner, till such an hour of the evening, in fact, as might best accord with the kind of emotion on which our hopes were fixed. Then he became as communicative as we could desire and indeed gave us his best reason for being so.

We had it from him again before the fire in the hall, as we had had our mild wonders of the previous night.

It appeared that the narrative he had promised to read us really required for a proper intelligence a few words of prologue.

Let me say here distinctly, to have done with it, that this narrative, from an exact transcript of my own made much later, is what I shall presently give. Poor Douglas, before his death--when it was in sight--committed to me the manuscript that reached him on the third of these days and that, on the same spot, with immense effect, he began

to read to our hushed little circle on the night of the fourth.

The departing ladies who had said they would stay didn't, of course, thank heaven, stay: they departed, in consequence of arrangements made, in a rage of curiosity, as they professed, produced by the touches with which he had already worked us up. But that only made his little final auditory more compact and select, kept it, round the hearth, subject to a common thrill.

The first of these touches conveyed that the written statement took up the tale at a point after it had, in a manner, begun.

The fact to be in possession of was therefore that his old friend, the youngest of several daughters of a poor country parson, had, at the age of twenty, on taking service for the first time in the schoolroom, come up to London, in trepidation, to answer in person an advertisement that had already placed her in brief correspondence with the advertiser. This person proved, on her presenting herself, for judgment, at a house in Harley Street, that impressed her as vast and imposing--this prospective patron proved a gentleman, a bachelor in the prime of life, such a figure as had never risen, save in a dream or an old novel, before a fluttered, anxious girl out of a Hampshire vicarage.

One could easily fix his type; it never, happily, dies out.

He was handsome and bold and pleasant, offhand and gay and kind.

He struck her, inevitably, as gallant and splendid,
but what took her most of all and gave her the courage she
afterward showed was that he put the whole thing to her as
a kind of favor, an obligation he should gratefully incur.

She conceived him as rich, but as fearfully extravagant--
saw him all in a glow of high fashion, of good looks,
of expensive habits, of charming ways with women.

He had for his own town residence a big house filled
with the spoils of travel and the trophies of the chase;
but it was to his country home, an old family place in Essex,
that he wished her immediately to proceed.

He had been left, by the death of their parents in India,
guardian to a small nephew and a small niece, children of a younger,
a military brother, whom he had lost two years before.

These children were, by the strangest of chances for a man
in his position--a lone man without the right sort of
experience or a grain of patience--very heavily on his hands.

It had all been a great worry and, on his own part doubtless,
a series of blunders, but he immensely pitied the poor chicks
and had done all he could; had in particular sent them
down to his other house, the proper place for them being
of course the country, and kept them there, from the first,

with the best people he could find to look after them,
parting even with his own servants to wait on them and going
down himself, whenever he might, to see how they were doing.

The awkward thing was that they had practically no other
relations and that his own affairs took up all his time.

He had put them in possession of Bly, which was healthy and secure,
and had placed at the head of their little establishment--

but below stairs only--an excellent woman, Mrs. Grose,

whom he was sure his visitor would like and who had formerly been
maid to his mother. She was now housekeeper and was also acting

for the time as superintendent to the little girl, of whom,

without children of her own, she was, by good luck, extremely fond.

There were plenty of people to help, but of course the young lady
who should go down as governess would be in supreme authority.

She would also have, in holidays, to look after the small boy,

who had been for a term at school--young as he was to be sent,

but what else could be done?--and who, as the holidays were

about to begin, would be back from one day to the other.

There had been for the two children at first a young lady

whom they had had the misfortune to lose. She had done

for them quite beautifully--she was a most respectable person--

till her death, the great awkwardness of which had, precisely,

left no alternative but the school for little Miles.

Mrs. Grose, since then, in the way of manners and things, had done as she could for Flora; and there were, further, a cook, a housemaid, a dairywoman, an old pony, an old groom, and an old gardener, all likewise thoroughly respectable.

So far had Douglas presented his picture when someone put a question.

"And what did the former governess die of?--of so much respectability?"

Our friend's answer was prompt. "That will come out.

I don't anticipate."

"Excuse me--I thought that was just what you ARE doing."

"In her successor's place," I suggested, "I should have wished to learn if the office brought with it--"

"Necessary danger to life?" Douglas completed my thought.

"She did wish to learn, and she did learn. You shall hear tomorrow what she learned. Meanwhile, of course, the prospect struck her as slightly grim. She was young, untried, nervous: it was a vision of serious duties and little company, of really great loneliness.

She hesitated--took a couple of days to consult and consider.

But the salary offered much exceeded her modest measure,

and on a second interview she faced the music, she engaged."

And Douglas, with this, made a pause that, for the benefit
of the company, moved me to throw in--

"The moral of which was of course the seduction exercised by the splendid
young man. She succumbed to it."

He got up and, as he had done the night before, went to the fire,
gave a stir to a log with his foot, then stood a moment with his back to us.

"She saw him only twice."

"Yes, but that's just the beauty of her passion."

A little to my surprise, on this, Douglas turned round to me.

"It WAS the beauty of it. There were others," he went on,

"who hadn't succumbed. He told her frankly all his difficulty--

that for several applicants the conditions had been prohibitive.

They were, somehow, simply afraid. It sounded dull--it sounded strange;

and all the more so because of his main condition."

"Which was--?"

"That she should never trouble him--but never, never:

neither appeal nor complain nor write about anything;
only meet all questions herself, receive all moneys from
his solicitor, take the whole thing over and let him alone.

She promised to do this, and she mentioned to me that when,
for a moment, disburdened, delighted, he held her hand,
thanking her for the sacrifice, she already felt rewarded."

"But was that all her reward?" one of the ladies asked.

"She never saw him again."

"Oh!" said the lady; which, as our friend immediately left us again,
was the only other word of importance contributed to the subject till,
the next night, by the corner of the hearth, in the best chair,
he opened the faded red cover of a thin old-fashioned gilt-edged album.

The whole thing took indeed more nights than one, but on the first occasion
the same lady put another question. "What is your title?"

"I haven't one."

"Oh, I have!" I said. But Douglas, without heeding me,
had begun to read with a fine clearness that was like a rendering
to the ear of the beauty of his author's hand.

I

I remember the whole beginning as a succession of flights and drops,
a little seesaw of the right throbs and the wrong. After rising, in town,
to meet his appeal, I had at all events a couple of very bad days--
found myself doubtful again, felt indeed sure I had made a mistake.
In this state of mind I spent the long hours of bumping,
swinging coach that carried me to the stopping place at which I
was to be met by a vehicle from the house. This convenience,
I was told, had been ordered, and I found, toward the close
of the June afternoon, a commodious fly in waiting for me.
Driving at that hour, on a lovely day, through a country to which
the summer sweetness seemed to offer me a friendly welcome,
my fortitude mounted afresh and, as we turned into the avenue,
encountered a reprieve that was probably but a proof of the point
to which it had sunk. I suppose I had expected, or had dreaded,
something so melancholy that what greeted me was a good surprise.
I remember as a most pleasant impression the broad, clear front,
its open windows and fresh curtains and the pair of maids