

THE TURN OF THE SCREW

THE LESSON OF THE MASTER

BY
HENRY JAMES

INTRODUCTION BY
HEYWOOD BROUN



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INTRODUCTION

I CAME across "The Turn of the Screw" by accident, though goodness knows I had heard enough of it by name. Even in those early days it was known to me by reputation as the thriller of thrillers, the last word in creeping horror stories. But I am by natural bent a timid man, and can get all I want of terror by the contemplation of my own life and its circumstances, without reaching out for those not normally on my own horizon. I knew very well that Mr. James must have done a superb job, because all the friends I had for whose opinion I had any affection had assured me that he had, and moreover I knew a little something about Mr. James. He was not to be sneezed at, no matter what he set himself to do. But though time after time I had been admonished to read "The Turn of the Screw," and time after time I had said graciously I certainly would, I had no earthly intention of doing it. Not for me, I said, these vicarious chills and fever.

But there did come a man who said, one day, "Have you ever read a story by Henry James called 'The Beast in the Jungle'?" and, upon my admission that I never had, he read me such a lecture as I have seldom heard. It was, he said, one of the few great short stories in the English language, and not to have read it was to go wantonly through life minus a definitely great experience.

Well, we talked about "The Beast in the Jungle," and I learned that it was in a collection of James stories called "The Better Sort."

I was living at the time in the Swiss Alps, in a small wooden chalet which gave on the Dents du Midi and the Rhone Valley, with windows disproportionately large

for a country which had in part the fact and in part the echo of a window tax, where you could look over thirty or forty miles of crystalline nothingness the moment you opened your eyes in the morning, and where you could not have escaped the sense of being on an eagle's perch if you had been stupid enough to try. The chalet's windows—and its doors too—opened onto the Rhone Valley. If you sat in the middle of the floor, you could see nothing but sky and snow covered peaks. Even if you went to a door or window, the natural drop of the land was such that you had to peer downwards quite considerably to find earth fellow to that on which your house was built.

At the time of which I speak, and in the circumstances, the way of living was at once free and circumscribed. It was possible to get all manner of luxuries, if you could pay for them, by way of the parcels post. Some of you may remember that before the war, the Swiss and the Germans were using the parcels post as competently as we came to use it later here, and that you could do well by yourself in the farthest hamlet if you knew where to send your orders. For example, it was possible to smoke the most admirable cigarettes in this woodsmen's village where I lived, and where my fellow townsmen made shift with true tobacconistic horrors for want of proper enterprise, by knowing just how to send for a really good cigarette. It was also possible, in theory at any rate, to order one's books. You may remember that those were the days of the Tauchnitz editions, and that for forty cents we could get H. G. Wells' "Passionate Friends," Galsworthy's "The Dark Flower," any amount of good Anne Douglas Sedgewick, Norman Douglas, and so on.

Well, it was, again in theory, possible to get Henry James, except that one had to write to London for him, since he was not current, and therefore not in Tauchnitz. The procedure for getting James was to run down to

Montreux, get either a Paris edition of the *New York Herald* or a Paris and London *Daily Mail* and find out the London addresses of the leading London bookshops. Armed with three of these, and prodded by my Jamesian friend who would have me read "The Beast in the Jungle," if my eyes dropped out, I sent off postcards to have "The Better Sort" sent to me as soon as possible. One bookshop replied that Mr. James had never written a book of that title, another that it was then in process of being published—it had been out some five or six years—and the third that Mr. Henry James had written only one distinguished short story, "The Turn of the Screw," that I must surely have made a mistake in the title, and that "The Turn of the Screw" was being sent to me under separate cover.

Well, there I was, of course, in my lonely roost in the high Alps, with "The Turn of the Screw" on its way to me, and no way of stopping it since 'parcels post debts were in those days in a class with poker debts as a call on one's honor. And only the companionship of the frosted hill tops to keep me from being frightened right out of my wits.

For two or three days after it came, I would not even open the parcel. I knew perfectly well what was going to happen to me—that I would wake up staring in the darkness of the night, seeing the baleful eyes of the butler at my window, watching the cowering figures of children in the shadowy corners of my room, bound helplessly in the spell of this man James whose piratical hold over other men's imaginations I could do nothing whatever against.

I did finally bring myself to the scratch. I opened the book, read a little of it, and then a little more, and, of course, finished it in precisely that hideous thralldom that had been its author's wicked purpose. And there was no clammy sensation I did not sense. There was no sinister horror I did not live through. For nights and nights I

would no more than cajole myself to sleep than I would wake staring out of my windows, glazed eyes fixed on the icy peaks, waiting, waiting, for that malign head to appear above the window sills. More than that, a full half the time the head did appear—at least, I could have sworn I saw it. My muscles were rigid, my nerves were zooming with a horrible intensity, my eyes throbbed with the pain of their protrusion. I cursed Henry James, my “Beast in the Jungle” friend, my debonair London bookseller. I ached thoroughly for those days of comparative peace when I knew no more of Henry than that he was the brother of William, when Alps were beautiful white Alps and not red-headed evil butlers, and when the fate of little children was a problem academic pure and simple. I was thoroughly badly off. If somebody had come along to tell me of the catharsis value of tragedy, or the ennobling effect of participating in a dignified horror, I would surely have landed him at the foot of my steepest Alp.

But a very odd thing was to happen to me. I was to learn a very important lesson from “The Turn of the Screw,” and it has stood me in good stead on many a day and night since. Along about the third night that my clammy obsession waked me, and I gaped dry-throated at the face in my starry window, I suddenly remembered that “The Turn of the Screw” had been written a fair number of years before I had ever read it, and that hundreds, probably thousands, of other unfortunates had stared at that same face in hundreds, probably thousands, of other windows. It was the most healing notion I ever had. In fact, I laughed. I knew for a certainty that, Henry James or no Henry James, that wretched monster could hardly have been so multiform as to exist actually in all of those windows. All of us were on the instant preposterous together—preposterous and safe. Any one of us was in mortal danger—all of us together were a comic and protected company. That deadly face fell back

out of my individual high Alpine window as promptly as if he had been a rag baby at Coney Island that I had just hit with a well aimed rag ball. All at once I knew why we do cling together, even if sight unseen. I could even understand why we sometimes behave so badly, when we huddle. We can do anything, we must do anything, rather than try to go it alone, with our helpless and terrified loneliness clutching at us in the night. It is of course just possible that Henry James wrote "The Turn of the Screw" to help us to discover this. It is also possible that he wrote it for some quite different reason, which will be fathomed in time for inclusion in some different preface. Many prefaces will certainly be written, many editions made, before "The Turn of the Screw" will have spent its capacity to conscript the human imagination.

HEYWOOD BROWN.

NEW YORK,
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THE TURN OF THE SCREW

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 cor-

respondence 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, off-hand 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 afterwards showed was that he put the whole thing to her as a kind of favour, 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 learnt. 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 see-saw 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 looking out; I remember the lawn and the bright flowers and the crunch of my wheels on the gravel and the clustered treetops over which the rooks circled and cawed in the golden sky. The scene had a greatness that made it a different affair from my own scant home, and there immediately appeared at the door, with a little girl in her hand, a civil person who dropped me as decent a curtesy as if I had been the mistress or a distinguished visitor. I had received in Harley Street a narrower notion of the place, and that, as I recalled it, made me think the proprietor still more