

The Turn of the Screw

by *Henry James*

Adapted for the stage by Tim Luscombe

Draft One

June 2016

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10 page synopsis

Act One.

Prelude.

Pre-set reveals two acting areas, with no sharp division between them. To one side of the stage is Mrs Conray's drawing room in 1870, but taking up the bulk of the playing area is Bly, a country house, in 1840.

Taken altogether, the pleasant set hints at nothing darker than Victorian wealth and good taste. However, when house lights dim, sound/music begins to suggest a much darker, scarier world.

The lights becomes shadowy, before a rocking chair starts to move of its own volition, as if there were a person occupying it. But there is no one there.

Music builds to a terrifying crescendo as lights abruptly snap out.

Scene One.

1870

When lights are restored, the rocking chair is still, and the focus has shifted to Mrs Conray's sunny suburban drawing room in a well-to-do part of North London.

Mrs Conray, 38-years-old, escorts another woman – a prospective governess – into the room.

Mrs Conray: Please, won't you take a seat?

Governess: Thank you, Mrs Conray.

The governess occupies the less elaborate of two chairs, and faces Mrs Conray across a desk.

Mrs Conray: (*Consulting references*) Naturally, I'm aware that a gentleman should never ask a lady her age, but I'm unaware of any rule preventing another *lady* from doing so, so, if you've no objection, I would be pleased to know yours.

Governess: None at all. I'm fifty years old.

Mrs Conray: (*Doing some quick mental arithmetic*) Good. My dear, your references are exemplary. Mrs Whittock writes that, in terms of supervising her children's health, welfare and education, you demonstrated supreme skill; your service to Mrs Hawk's household was apparently matchless; and Mrs Ashmore, who initially directed me to you, says she found you the most agreeable woman she's ever known in your position – that you would, in fact, be worthy of any whatever. Altogether, quite exceptional. So I see no reason, if you're willing to take charge of my three little darlings, to prevent you from doing so.

Governess: Naturally, Mrs Conray, I'd be delighted.

Mrs Conray: You mightn't be so delighted when you meet them. They're horrors, every single one of them.

Governess: Oh, I've experienced plenty of real horrors in the past. I'm sure yours will provide no new challenge.

Mrs Conray: Despite the briefness of this interview, the offer is not made lightly. I'm very aware that the importance of a governess in the development of a child's mind and body can hardly be overstated. In fact, I've often thought that the governesses of England must play as vital a role in maintaining our Empire as the government itself does.

The governess is amused and flattered.

(*continued*) I had a governess myself, of course, and she shaped me... Well... Her influence on my life was profound. Now, my dear, my only desire would be to know a little more about you. Your background. You weren't originally a Londoner.

Governess: I was born in Hampshire.

Mrs Conray: Your father?

Governess: A parson.

Mrs Conray: And you began work at what age?

Governess: At the age of twenty.

Mrs Conray: For whom?

Governess: I beg your pardon?

Mrs Conray: Your first employer?

Governess: Well, that was a very long time ago, Mrs Conray.

Mrs Conray: Nevertheless, her name...?

Governess: I'm afraid I can't remember the name.

Mrs Conray: You must, surely. Your very first engagement.

Governess: Are you unsatisfied with my references –?

Mrs Conray: Quite the contrary. They're nonpareil. But I'm interested in hearing about your early experiences as well as your most recent ones. I can't imagine how daunting it must have been at twenty to take charge of the welfare of young children. A young provincial girl – you weren't sophisticated or even knowledgeable I assume. I imagine the task must have been formidable.

The governess is silent.

(continued) If I'm to trust you with my nursery and schoolroom... Well, I ask these questions because, naturally –

Governess: The references –

Mrs Conray: *(A flash of aggression)* I said damn the references. I want to hear you talk about your first employment.

Governess: I can't do that, Mrs Conray.

Mrs Conray: Why ever not?

Governess: I'm afraid I simply can't... I won't talk about it.

Mrs Conray: I'm correct then. It was a difficult time for you. Unhappy perhaps. Well, you were young. You've obviously learned a good deal in the intervening years. Come on, tell me. I've a right to know.

Governess: *(Rising)* I'm sorry to have taken up your afternoon and disappointed you. I would prefer to leave.

Mrs Conray: Sit down.

Governess: Mrs Conray, I really would rather –

Mrs Conray: I don't think you understand. I will be answered. What was the name of your first employer?

Governess: Please let me go –

Mrs Conray: I said sit down!

The governess sits.

Governess: I'm sorry that I can't help you.

Mrs Conray: I'll give you a clue.

Governess: I, I don't understand why –

Mrs Conray: It was a young man in London.

Governess: (*Shocked*) What...?

Mrs Conray: Ah, light dawns. A dashing young man in Weymouth St.

Governess: In heaven's name, who are you?

Mrs Conray: You don't recognise me?

A dashing man enters.

(*continued*) So, this dashing young man placed an advertisement in the press requesting the services of a governess, and, neither experienced nor travelled, you answered it –

The governess has risen, shedding three decades and every bit of her practised self-assurance. So it is a fluttered, anxious girl, never before in the capital, who approaches her potential first employer in trepidation – a splendid young man – in Weymouth Street.

Scene Two.

1840

Weymouth Street.

Employer: Yes, it was almost exactly two years ago that my brother, poor chap, passed away.

He is determined to make an impression and knows how to do so.

(*continued*) He and his wife were out in India where both of them, I'm sorry to say, succumbed to typhoid. Damned water was contaminated. That's what they tell me.

As well as being thoroughly impressed by the young man, the governess can't help but be distracted by the room, almost overwhelmed by its size and magnificence.

(*continued*) And there was no one else. Practically no other relation. So, the upshot is, I became sole guardian to my niece and nephew, little Flora and Miles. Bad luck for them, eh?

He laughs and she copies.

(*continued*) Well, at first, the whole thing was a great worry. Naturally I wished to do what I could for the poor chicks, but I'm alone, you understand, with neither the right sort of experience nor, to be frank, a grain of patience for such things.

He laughs, she copies.

(*continued*) So I sent them down to Bly, my other house. I thought the country really the proper place for children. I went down myself a few times to see how they were getting on, and took a couple of my best people with me, but my affairs here take up all my time as you can no doubt imagine, and I travel a good deal.

Governess: Yes. (*Admiring his trophies*) Such extraordinary things...

He straddles a chair.

Employer: So, my dear, if you took the post, you'd be in supreme authority at Bly – in charge of the children naturally, as well as the below stairs people. There's a housekeeper, Mrs Grose – my mother's old maid – immensely capable. There's a cook, an old pony, a couple of housemaids, a gardener and the boy Luke. Little Flora's at home all the time, and Miles... Well, we had the misfortune to lose the last governess. (*Responding to her inquisitive expression*) Yes. A most respectable young woman, very like yourself – managed the children quite beautifully, but unfortunately she died.

Governess: (*Shocked*) Oh.

Employer: Which meant – it was all, to be frank, greatly awkward – I had to arrange a school for the boy. He's young of course, but I didn't know what else to do. Anyway, he'll be coming home for the summer holiday any day now. You look worried. Does the prospect strike you as terribly dull? Serious duties and little company? (*Bringing his chair closer*) I see it in your face.

Governess: Well...

Employer: It's true that for several applicants, the conditions have seemed prohibitive. They fear, I think, more than anything, being lonely. Or perhaps they're afraid. But Bly is a very cheerful place, you know, and healthy and secure. I'm certain for a fact you'd get on tremendously well with Mrs Grose. (*Closer*) And, my dear, your acceptance of this offer would do me, personally, such a very great favour. I would be (*kissing her hand*) forever in your debt. (*Looking into her eyes*) I'd gratefully incur such an obligation to you. (*He sits back, sprawling magnificently in his chair*). And I would be prepared, in addition to board and lodging, to pay you a pound and ten shillings a week.

The governess looks even more shocked, this time positively.

(*continued*) Now, what do you say?

Mrs Conroy interrupts from 1870.

Mrs Conroy: What *could* you say, so charming as he was.

Governess: (*Entranced*) Oh yes.

Mrs Conroy: How persuasive.

Governess: Very, oh very.

Mrs Conroy: And such a way with women.

Governess: I accept.

Employer: You do? Well, that's splendid. Then it's to Bly I'd like you immediately to proceed.

Governess: Very well.

Employer: There's just one further condition.

Governess: (*Innocently*) What?

Employer: That you should never trouble me – but never, never –

Governess: Oh.

Employer: No, neither appeal nor complain nor write to me about anything. You'll meet all questions yourself – you'll receive all moneys from my solicitor – you'll take the whole thing over and let me alone.

Governess: I promise I will. And I promise...

Employer: What?

Governess: You won't be disappointed in me.

Employer: My dear, you have taken a huge weight off my shoulders. (*Holding her hand*) Thank you sincerely for the sacrifice you're making for my family. The sacrifice you make for me.

The governess is in love.

The employer abruptly exits.

Scene Three.

1870

Mrs Conroy calls the Governess back to 1870 to reveal who she really is.

Mrs Conroy: You know, my dear, that my uncle *still* has a very considerable way with women.

Governess: Your uncle?

Mrs Conroy: Perhaps he's not quite as gallant as he was thirty years ago, but, yes –

Governess: You mean?

Mrs Conroy: Terrifically charming, even now.

Governess: Oh, God, I see it! Flora!

Flora: (*For Mrs Conroy is in fact Flora, now in middle age*) He never spoke about what happened. And of course I was too young to remember. One senses within a family – doesn't one? – when a subject is out of bounds. One simply refrains from enquiring. We weren't especially close. As I grew up, I was often away from him, in... well, in various homes and other places.

Governess: Mrs Conroy, what do you want from me?

Flora: It's quite simple, my dear. I lost both my parents, but I had a brother. And he was in your charge. And I want to know what happened.

Governess: You really don't remember?

Flora: I have a cloudy memory of the very end, that's all. A long coach ride. But it's indistinct, and there's nothing more. You see, that beautiful young man is, I'm afraid, now quite white-haired and doddering, and his advanced age is the only explanation I can offer for the fact that, suddenly, after all these years he wishes to discuss... Well, he's even started to wonder – perhaps he's really losing his wits, poor old chap – whether what had been agreed by everyone, was what *really* happened. And the fact is, he mentioned you – your name. Naturally, hearing his doubts, I also became keen to discover the truth. Old Mrs Grose has passed away, and you couldn't be found to corroborate or contradict the story. Given what you went through, I never imagined

you'd still be working as a governess. But by chance, my friend, Mrs Ashmore, was getting rid of hers, since her children were grown, and there was that name again. Your name. Quite a coincidence, isn't it? She provided me with your address, and here you are. So, naturally, my dear, I'm fascinated to hear what occurred. From your point of view. In fact, I insist on it.

Governess: Mrs Conray –

Flora: Please stop calling me that. Mrs Conray is my seamstress.

Governess: What?

Flora: I had to think of something you wouldn't recognise. I'm not married. I have no children. I require no governess. Only the truth.

Governess: But, Flora, you yourself must remember –

Flora: I was eight. I told you. I remember next to nothing. I had a brother, I know that. And I wish to understand, and I will understand – now – here, in my house. You're not leaving until I do.

Governess: I... It's not possible for me to... Have pity on me, Flora. It was such a long time –

Flora: I don't pretend this little trap is enjoyable – for either of us – but you'd probably agree that a more formal investigation would inevitably be worse. Those involved would almost certainly be less understanding than I am. For who – what rational outsider – on hearing the facts as I've learned them, would believe that you should go unhung?

Governess: (*Slumping, defeated, into the chair*) Flora...!

Scene Four.

1840

Bly.

Early summer. Sunlight and birdsong.

Mrs Grose enters. She's plain, stout, simple and utterly wholesome.

Mrs Grose: Flora! Come here, my love, and help me with this.

Flora: Yes, Mrs Grose.

38-year-old Flora has lost 30 years and is now Flora the child: intelligent, open and charming.

The governess exits.

Mrs Grose: She'll be here any minute, and we have to be ready for her.

Flora: We're nearly ready, Mrs Grose.

Mrs Grose and Flora move furniture about, as necessary, in readiness for the governess' arrival. Mrs Grose smooths Flora's hair.

Mrs Grose: And mind you give the young lady a nice proper curtsy when she arrives. Now, here she is. A nice curtsy. That's it.

Mrs Grose and Flora curtsy deeply.

The governess approaches them with a couple of lightish travelling bags.

(continued) Welcome, miss. *(Taking the bigger of the bags)* I hope your journey was pleasant enough.

Governess: Oh yes, very, thank you.

Mrs Grose: And the fly gave you no trouble? Take her other bag, Flora, there's a dear.

Governess: No, not at all, it was very commodious. The house is so large and the grounds so beautiful. The master really did it insufficient justice.

Mrs Grose: Flora will take you to your room, miss –

Flora: Yes, Mrs Grose –

Mrs Grose: While I see about the tea. *(Exits with bags).*

Flora: This way please. Come along. *(Leading the governess about)* I can sense it. We're going to be great friends, you and I, aren't we?

Governess: Oh yes, Flora, I hope so.

Flora: Here it is. I'm having my bed moved here beside yours, and when Miles returns from school in a day or two, he'll sleep in that room, the one down the hall. Now, I expect you'd like to see the tower.

Governess: The tower? Yes, very much.

Flora: This way. Don't dawdle.

Governess: Oh what beautiful drapes.

Flora laughs.

(continued) We have nothing like them at home. And that mirror!

Flora: Why? What's so special about a silly old glass?

Governess: I've never seen a full-length one before.

Flora: You mean... You've never seen yourself from head to foot?

The governess is thrilled by her own reflection.

(continued) Did you live in a nunnery?

Governess: A parsonage.

Flora: Come on, don't you want to climb the tower? It's got machicolated turrets.

Governess: What are they?

Flora: For pouring boiling oil out of in the olden days. Look, there's a portrait of my great, great, great grandfather.

Governess: Ah! His eyes follow you wherever you go. It's uncanny.

Flora: Miles says it's a visual joke.

Governess: My word, it's just like *The Mysteries of Udolpho*!

Flora: The mysteries of where?

Governess: A book. A true horror story.

Flora: You have *books* in the parsonage then.

To read the entire play, please contact Tim directly on tim@timluscombe.com

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