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JANET.

THE STORY OF A GOVERNESS.

By MRS. OLIPHANT, Author of 'Laird of Norlaw,' 'Agnes.'

CHAPTER XLIV.

IT was strange that it should be Gussy, who was not ideal or visionary, but very matter of fact in all her ways, who was the most cruelly offended by the events of this night. It seemed to Gussy that she had been deceived and played upon by everybody. By her mother, who had evidently never narrated to her the gravity of the position, though she had known the fact for years; by Meredith, who had seemed to know more of it than Gussy did, and whose eyes had been keen with understanding, following every word of what was to Gussy merely the ravings without consequence of a madman; he knew more of it than she did, who had helped to take care of the secret inmate. And then Dolff, her brother. What was the meaning of this cloud of tempest which had come into Dolff's trivial schoolboyish life? Why had he tried to kill, if that was what he wanted, or, at least, to injure, to assault Meredith? It was all a mystery to Gussy. She understood nothing except that many things had been going on in the house which she either did not know at all, or knew imperfectly—that she had been possibly made a dupe of, brought down from the position which she had seemed to hold of right as the chief influence in the family. She had thought this was how it was: her mother's confidant, the nurse and guardian angel of her love, the controller, more or less, of all the house. And it turned out that she knew nothing, that there were all kinds of passions and mysteries in her own house with which she was unacquainted, that what she knew she knew imperfectly, and that even in confidence she was kept in the dark. Gussy was not imaginative, and consequently had little power of entering into the feelings or divining the movements of the minds of others. She was wounded, mortified to the depth of her heart, and angry, with a deep, silent anger not easily to be overcome. She did not linger nor ask for explanations, but went straight up to her room without a moment's pause, careless that both her mother, whom she generally attended through the troublesome process of undressing, and Julia, whom she usually held under such strict authority, were left behind, the latter in contempt of all ordinary hours. Janet, whose charge she was, was not visible, she had stolen away, as it had lately been her habit to do. Janet, Gussy felt sure, was mixed up in it too; but how was she mixed up in it? Think as she would, Miss Harwood could not make out to her satisfaction how it could be that Janet could have influenced Dolff to assault Meredith. Janet had no quarrel with Meredith, could not have. He had been civil to her—too civil, Gussy had sometimes thought. She remembered that there was a time when she had felt it very tiresome to have to discuss Miss Summerhayes so often; and on the night of the ball, certainly, they had danced and talked together almost more than was becoming. How, then, could Janet have moved Dolff to attack Meredith? It seemed impossible to discern any plausible reason; and yet Gussy had a moral certainty that Janet was somehow mixed up in it. Could it be that the joke about Dolff and his accompaniments had been the cause? Gussy felt involuntarily that it must be something more serious than that.

She went to bed resolutely, for, indeed, there are times when it requires a severe effort to do this—to shut out the commotions which are around, and turn one's back upon all the questions that require solving. Gussy felt bitterly that she had no certainty as to what might be going on in the house, which she had lately been as sure of as if she had created it. Her mother, for anything she knew, might be going from room to room, her chair set aside, and all her pretences with it. To think that she, Gussy, should have been taken in by it so long, and have believed whatever was told her. Her brother, Dolff, so good-natured, of so little account as he was! might have caught Meredith again at a disadvantage, and have accomplished now what he tried before. The house, her calm and secure domain, seemed now full of incomprehensible noises and mysterious sounds to Gussy. But she would not even look over the banisters to see what was going on. She would not open her door, much less steal downstairs, as another woman might have done, to find out everything. She went to bed. She asked no explanation. She shut her door, and drew her curtains, and closed her eyes. Whatever might be going on within or without, the gateways of her mind were closely fastened up, so that she might hear or see no more.

It was Priscilla who put her mistress to bed, and Mrs Harwood was very angry with her children, feeling that Gussy had deserted her and that Dolff had insulted her. But it takes more than that to make a woman betray her sons and daughters. With the flush of anger still on her cheek and the tremble on her lips she told Priscilla how tired Miss Harwood was, how she had been overdoing herself, how she had made her go to bed. 'I told her you could see to all I want quite nicely, Priscilla.' 'Yes, ma'am,' said Priscilla; but it was doubtful how far she was taken in, for, of course, the servants knew a great deal more than they were supposed to know, and where they did not know they guessed freely, and with wonderful success.

It was curious to see them all assemble in the morning at the breakfast-table as if nothing had happened. Nay, that was not a thing that was possible. There were traces of last night's excitement on every face; but yet they came in and sat down opposite each other, and Gussy helped Dolff to his coffee and again wondered how in all the world Janet could be the cause of his attack on Meredith, for it was evident that now, at least, Dolff was not in a state of mind to do anything for Janet. He never spoke to her during breakfast. He avoided her eye. When she spoke, he turned away as if he could not let her voice reach his ears if he could help it. How then could Janet be mixed up in it? Gussy was sorely perplexed by this problem. As for Janet, though she was pale, she put on an elaborate appearance of composure and of knowing nothing which (in her readiness to be exasperated with everything) provoked Gussy most of all. She said to herself that it was a worse offence to pretend not to know when everybody was aware that she must know, than to show her knowledge in the most irritating way. No doubt, however, that if Janet had betrayed any knowledge, Gussy would have found that the most ill-timed exhibition that could be. There was very little conversation, except between Janet and Julia, during this embarrassing meal. And Mrs Harwood came out of her room as she had gone into it, unattended by her daughters. There was less signs about her than about any of them of the perturbation of last night. Sometimes an old woman will bear agitation better than the young. She had probably had so much of it, been compelled to gulp it down so often! Her eyes were less bright than usual—nay, they had a glance of fire in them which was not usual in their calmer state, and the colour in her cheeks was fresher than that of anyone else in the house. The girls were all pale—even Julia, and Dolff of a sort of dusky pallor, which made his light hair and moustache stand out from his face. But Mrs Harwood's pretty complexion was unchanged — perhaps because they had all made so many discoveries she had made none, but had been aware of everything and of far more than anyone else knew for years.

Early in the day the policeman of last night appeared with a summons to Mrs Harwood, directing her to appear before some board to show cause why she should have kept, unregistered and unsuspected, a lunatic shut up in her house. Mrs Harwood saw the man herself, and begged to be allowed to make him a little present 'for your great civility last night.' The policeman almost blushed, as he was a man who bore a conscience, for he was not conscious of being very civil; but he accepted the gratuity, let us hope, with the intention of being civil next time he was employed on any such piece of business. While he spoke to Mrs Harwood in the hall, whither she had been wheeled out to see him, Meredith came from his room and joined her. He had not escaped so well as she the excitement of the previous night, and it was with unfeigned astonishment that he contemplated this old lady, fresh and smiling, her pretty colour unimpaired, her eyes as bright as usual. She was over sixty; she had just been baffled in an object which had been the chief inspiration of her life for years, disappointed, exposed to universal censure, perhaps to punishment, but her wonderful force of nature was not abated; the extraordinary crises which had passed over her, breaking the bonds of her silnient, delivering her from her weakness, had left no signs of exhaustion upon her. She looked like a woman who had never known what trouble or anxiety was as she sat there smiling, assuring the policeman that she could fully explain everything, and would not fail to do so in the proper quarter. She turned to Meredith as he appeared, and held out her hand to him. 'Good morning, my dear Charley; I hope you are not the worse for last night's agitation. You see our friend here has come to summon me to make explanations about my poor dear upstairs. You will appear for me and settle everything, won't you? You see this gentleman is a barrister,' she explained, smiling to the man who stood looking on.

'Of course I will,' Meredith said.

Upon this the policeman took courage, and with a scrape made his *amende honorable*. 'I ought to beg your pardon, sir, and yours too, lady, for all the trouble last night. I had every confidence in Jim Harrison, the man that said that he could identify the culprit—that is the fellow as nearly killed you, sir—and rumours have been getting up all over the place as it was the young gentleman here as had been a bit wild and hated you like poison.'

'Dolff never hated me like poison, did he?' said Meredith, elevating his eyebrows and appealing to Mrs Harwood.

'Never! you have always been one of his best friends.'

'Well!' said the officer, who was not too confident either in this assurance or in the conclusion he had been obliged to come to, 'There was a parcel of tales about. You can never tell how these tales gets up. However, it's all been a mistake, for when Jim sees yon young gentleman he says in a moment, 'Nothing of the sort—that's not 'im.' So it all falls to the ground, as you'll see, sir, being used to these questions, as the lady says—for want of evidence.'

'Exactly,' said Meredith, 'and you'll do me the justice to say, officer, that I told you it would from the first. It's worth while occasionally taking a man's advice that knows something about it, you perceive, instead of your Mr Jim, who evidently knows nothing but what he thinks he saw or didn't see.'

'That's it, sir, I suppose,' said the policeman, 'and if he did see it, or if he didn't, I couldn't tell, not if it was as much as my place was worth.'

'He would have looked rather foolish, though, don't you think, in the witness-box? You see,' added Meredith, with a laugh. 'You might have spared this lady the trouble of last night.

'No, I don't see that, sir,' said the policeman, promptly, 'for if it didn't answer one query, it did another. I'm very sorry to upset a lady, but she didn't ought to bottle up a madman in a private house without no register nor information to the commissioners, nor proper precautions. You know that, sir, just as well as me.'

'How do you know that the lady has no license?' said Meredith, 'or that her relation's illness is not perfectly known? I think you will find a little difficulty in proving that, and then your superiors will be less pleased with the discovery. However that's my business, as Mrs Harwood has confided that to me,' he added, with a laugh which he could not restrain at the man's sudden look of alarm.

'Don't find fault with our friend; he was as civil as it was possible to be. Good-morning, and thank you,' said Mrs Harwood, sitting, with her placid smile, watching the visitor, stiff and uneasy in his plain clothes, as he went away. When the door was shut upon him by Priscilla, who sniffed and tossed her head at the necessity of being thus civil to a man who had made so much commotion in the house—much as she and her fellow servants had enjoyed the excitement—Mrs Harwood's countenance underwent a certain change. The smile faded; a look of age crept round the still beaming eyes. 'If you will wheel me back to my room, Charley, we can talk,' she said. She could not but be conscious that he was thinking, asking himself why she could not walk, she who had found power to do so when she wanted it; but she betrayed no consciousness of this inevitable thought. She was very grave when he came round from the back of her chair and stood facing her in the firelight, which on a dull London morning in the end of January was the chief light in the room. Perhaps the dreary atmosphere threw a cloud upon her face. Her soft, half-caressing tone was gone. She had become hard and business-like in a moment. 'You want me to explain,' she said.

'If you please. You know how much my father was involved—that craze about the money to be paid back. Even a mad repetition like that seems likely to have a foundation in fact. Is it true?'

She bent her head a little, and for the moment cast down her eyes. 'It was true.'

'It *was* true; then you have alienated——'

'Wait a little. There were no such creditors as his own children, who would have been ruined had not I saved them. They knew nothing of any question of money. They knew nothing of——'

'Of his existence at all—till last night?'

'I am bound to furnish you with every information I can. The young ones knew nothing of his existence. Gussy did; but only that I kept him there to save him from an asylum where he might have been treated cruelly—nothing more. You will not take a high moral tone against me, as she is ready to do, and Dolff——'

'No; I will take up no high moral tone,' said Meredith; 'but the position is very difficult. You have not, I suppose, done away with the money?'

'It is well invested; it is intact. We could not have lived as we have done on my own money. Now, of course, I must give it up——And no injustice need be done,' she added with a sigh; 'it can be paid—at last.'

'With interest for all these years?' said Meredith, with a smile.

'Oh, what are you talking of?' she said. 'People will be so glad to get anything so unexpectedly, that they will say nothing about the interest. I even think——'

'What do you even think?' he said, as she paused.

'How can I tell how you may take it, whether it will commend itself to you or not? There might still be an arrangement by which things might be managed.

'After it gets into the papers and it is known that you have been concealing——'

'Oh,' she cried again, 'you are more dull then I gave you credit for being, Charley Meredith! Who will notice up in Liverpool a romantic story (which is all the papers will make of it) occurring in St. John's Wood? Who will link one thing to another and understand exactly what has happened, or believe that——I might have taken him in a miserable wreck, out of sheer love and kindness. I did, I did!' she cried, suddenly, her face melting out of its hardness, her eyes filling with tears. 'You may not believe me, but I did. I thought he had not a penny. I went to all the expense of fitting up the wing for him—working with my own hands at it, that nobody should suspect—believing that Vicars had brought him back with his own money—that *he* had done—I did, though you may not believe me,' she said.

'I have not said I did not believe you. We are all very queer creatures—mixed up. And then when you found he had that old pocket-book—for it was full of something better than old papers then—you were tempted, and you——'

She nodded her head; then said, after a while, 'I do not accept that formula. I was tempted—and I did what I had a right to do. *I* had wronged nobody—I knew nothing about them. If I had divided *that* among them, what would it have been?—a trifle to each, but enough to dry up all the sympathy they were meeting with. He had made ducks and drakes of more than that belonging to me. And the children were the most deeply wronged. I took it for their sakes, to make up what they had been robbed of. It can go to the others now, and you will see how much it will be.'

'You said something,' said Meredith, 'about an arrangement that might still be made?'

'Yes—if you could lend yourself to it, Charley. It could not be done without you.'

'I cannot tell whether I could lend myself to it or not, until I hear what it is.'

She looked at him, and two or three times made as if she would speak, but shut her lips again. Her eyes searched his face with an anxious expression. 'I don't know how you will take it,' she said, hesitating; 'I don't know how you will take it.' Then, after a pause, she added, 'I will begin by asking you a question. Do you want to marry my daughter Gussy? Yes or no?'

Meredith made a step backwards, and put his hand to his breast as if he had received a blow. In that moment various dreams swept through his mind. Janet's image was not the only one, though it had the freshness of being the last. One of those dreams, indeed, was no other than the freedom of his own bachelor estate, and the advantage of life which was not bound by any social ties. He avowed, however, at length soberly—'I think I may say yes, Mrs Harwood—that is what has been for a long time in my mind.'

CHAPTER XLV.

THE conduct of affairs in the house of the Harwoods was very dreary during the whole of this day. It was, to begin with, a very dreary day, not fog, which can be borne, but one of those dark days which are the scourge of London, when everything is dull and without colour without and within, the skies grey, the earth grey, the leafless branches rising like a black tracery upon the colourless background, the light scarcely enough to swear by, to make it seem unnatural to shut the shutters and light the lamp, which is what every well-constituted mind desires to do in the circumstances. And in the moral atmosphere the same atmosphere reigned. Gussy had a countenance like the day. She, who had at no time much colour, had now none. She was like the landscape; hair, eyes, and cheeks seemed all the same. Every glimmer of light seemed to have been