

THE TURN OF THE SCREW

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Synopsis

Setting: Bly, an English country-house

PROLOGUE

The Prologue introduces ‘a curious story, written in faded ink’, the personal account of a young governess, sent to instruct a boy and a girl in the country, long ago...

ACT ONE

On her journey to Bly, the Governess ponders her position’s uncertainties: the orphaned children, the old housekeeper, and her instructions not to contact her charges’ only relative.

The children – Miles and Flora – together with the housekeeper, Mrs. Grose, welcome the Governess; Mrs. Grose assures her they are clever and good. The Governess feels at home. When she receives a letter from Miles’s school dismissing him as ‘an injury to his friends’, Mrs. Grose’s protestations and the sight of the children playing reassure her; she decides to ignore it.

Enjoying a warm summer evening in the grounds, the Governess sees a figure on the tower whom she at first imagines to be the children’s relative. But it is not. She suspects it may be a madman or intruder.

As the children are playing indoors, the Governess sees the man again, gazing in at the window. Mrs. Grose identifies him as Quint, the master’s former valet and Miles’s companion, who ‘made free’ with the Governess’s predecessor, Miss Jessel. Both are now dead. Horror-struck, the Governess fears that he has come back for Miles, and swears to protect the children. Mrs. Grose offers her support.

During the children’s lesson, Miles sings a strange song; he asks the Governess if she likes it.

Sitting by the lake with Flora, the Governess sees her staring at Miss Jessel, who has appeared on the other side. Sending Flora away, the Governess believes that both children are lost.

At night in the garden, Quint calls to Miles, and Miss Jessel to Flora. The Governess comes upon them as the ghosts disappear, and asks Miles what he is doing. ‘You see, I am bad,’ he answers.

ACT TWO

Quint and Jessel converse, she accusing him of betrayal, he speaking of the friend he seeks. The Governess admits that she is lost in a labyrinth.

In the churchyard, the children emulate choirboys. The Governess tells Mrs. Grose that they are complicit with Quint and Jessel. She has a disconcerting conversation with Miles and thinks he is challenging her to act.

In the schoolroom, the Governess finds Miss Jessel, who says to her that she cannot rest. She writes a letter to her employer telling him what has occurred.

In Miles’s bedroom, she tells him that she has written to his guardian. Quint calls to him. The candle goes out; Miles says that it was he who extinguished it.

Quint’s voice is heard encouraging Miles to retrieve the letter. He complies.

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During Miles's piano practice, the Governess realizes that Flora has slipped away - to meet, she suspects, Miss Jessel. She and Mrs. Grose go in search of her.

At the lake, the Governess accuses Flora of seeing Miss Jessel, who remains invisible to Mrs. Grose. Flora denies it, and Mrs. Grose leads her away. The Governess fears she has lost the housekeeper's support.

After a horrendous night with Flora, Mrs. Grose prepares to remove her; she also informs the Governess that Miles has stolen the letter.

The Governess confronts Miles. Quint - at first unseen, then visible - warns him to remain silent. She forces Miles to name who made him take the letter. Miles blurts out 'Peter Quint, you devil!' collapsing in the Governess's arms. Realizing he is dead, she sings the strange song he once sang to her.

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