

1870

Mrs Conray calls the governess back to 1870 to reveal who she really is.

Mrs Conray: My uncle *still* has a very considerable way with women.

Governess: Your...?

Mrs Conray: Not as gallant as he was thirty years ago of course –

Governess: You mean?

Mrs Conray: But tremendously charming, even now.

A fluttering of wings as the birds in the street all take flight at once.

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

Mrs Conray is in fact Flora, one of the governess's first charges, now in middle age.

Flora: When I was growing up, he never spoke about what happened. I was never particularly close to him. I was eight – too young to remember – and I never enquired. As a child one senses – doesn't one? – when a subject is out of bounds. And now he's dying. It's the only explanation I have for the fact that, after all these years, he wishes to discuss... Well, he's even started to wonder – perhaps the old chap's losing his wits, what do you think? – whether what was readily agreed by everyone, was what *really* happened.

Governess: What do you want from me?

Flora: It's obvious, isn't it? I lost both my parents. I had a brother. He and I were in your charge. I wish to know what happened to him.

Governess: But, Flora, you must remember...

Flora: Almost nothing. A boy in a brightly coloured waistcoat, no more real than a portrait. A cloudy memory of the very end. A long coach ride I believe. Partial, indistinct. You see, my uncle mentioned your name. It meant nothing to me, and old Mrs Grose has passed away. But then, by chance, my friend Mrs Ashmore was getting rid of her governess. Her children are grown. And there was that name again. Your name. She provided me with your address, and here you are.

Governess: Mrs Conray –

Flora: Mrs Conray is my seamstress.

The governess is perplexed.

(continued) It had to be a name you wouldn't recognise. I'm not married. I have no children. I require no governess. Only the truth.

Governess: Please, Flora, pity me.

Flora: I don't pretend this little trap is enjoyable – for either of us – but a more formal investigation would inevitably be worse – for you. Strangers – external agencies – would be less accommodating. You understand my meaning. For who – what rational outsider – on hearing the facts as I heard them reported, would believe that you should go free? I wish to understand what happened at Bly, and you shan't leave until I do.

Scene Five.

1840

Bly.

Early summer. Sunlight and mating-season birdsong.

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

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

Flora: Yes, Mrs Grose.

38-year-old Flora has lost 30 years and is now Flora the child: intelligent, open and charming. She carries a bunch of flowers she's handpicked from the garden.

The governess exits.

Mrs Grose: She'll be here any minute.

Mrs Grose and Flora remove all the remaining dustsheets in readiness for the governess' arrival. Mrs Grose smooths Flora's hair.

(continued) And mind you give the young lady a nice proper curtsy when she arrives. Now, a nice curtsy. That's it.

The governess has re-entered with a couple of lightish travelling bags. Mrs Grose and Flora curtsy deeply.

(continued) You're very welcome, miss. *(Taking the bags)* I hope your journey was pleasant.

Governess: Oh yes, thank you.

Mrs Grose: The fly gave you no trouble?

Governess: Not at all – quite commodious. The house and the grounds are so beautiful. The master really did it insufficient justice. And you must be Flora.

Flora: (*Presenting her flowers*) I picked these for you.

Governess: (*Accepting them*) Aren't they lovely! So pretty. How thoughtful of you. Now let me see, there's marigold and lavender and – Oh! Ah! I think something bit me.

Mrs Grose: Let me see.

The governess has been bitten on the inside of her right wrist.

Flora: It's not poisonous.

Mrs Grose: Oh, now, just a little insect. I'll fetch you some ointment, miss.

Governess: No no, I'll survive alright!

Flora laughs.

Mrs Grose: Then Flora will take you to your room –

Flora: Yes, Mrs Grose –

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

Flora: This way, come along. (*Leading the governess about*) You know, I can sense it. You and I are going to be great friends, aren't we?

Governess: 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.

The governess is rubbing her right wrist. It itches.

Governess: Oh what beautiful drapes.

Flora laughs.

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

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