

A Night at Bolton Hall

A Governess' Adventure, Related by Herself.

“A governess' life monotonous, do you say, my dear? Well, perhaps it may be, as a general rule; but I don't think any woman's existence, however quietly and obscurely it may be passed, is ever entirely devoid of adventure. I have been a governess for forty years now, for I am past sixty, though I hardly look it; and I have had some curious things happen to me in the course of these forty years. There are more biographies in the world than ever get written, my dear, and I have often thought that the scenes of my life, if they were told as some people know how to picture them out, wouldn't make such a very uninteresting book.

“I never told you about the gawky young man, with the neglected education, who fell in love with me, when I was teaching him syntax and prosody, did I? No, nor the widower with seven children who wanted me to go out to India with him, as his wife, at twenty-four hours' notice? Dear heart alive! I often wonder what has become of them all. But the strangest thing of any, was what happened to me, when I was in old England, years and years before I thought of coming over to this country, my dear.

“It was just after poor Allan Percival died of scarlet fever; we were to have been married at the next Christmas, if all had gone right, and, naturally, I was feeling lonesome and low-spirited enough. But I've always found hard work the best cure for the blues, and when I had cried my poor little solitary cry out, I put an advertisement, 'Wanted—A Situation as Governess,' in the *Times*, and sat down, patiently to await the result. For a forlorn little governess must live, even though she has been what the world calls 'disappointed.'

“Well, the answer came in good time—a letter from a place called Bolton Hall, in Lincolnshire, written by an old lady who wished to engage a capable instructress for her grandchild, a little girl of twelve years old. Only one pupil, advantageous terms, and an early place, among gentle-people—who are always more readily pleased, I have found by experience, than your upstarts who have built their golden temples of fortune upon the foundations of a single day. I really did not think it would be possible for me to do better, so I wrote back that I would be there upon a certain day, two weeks off.

“I had never been in Lincolnshire before, and I cannot say I was very favorably impressed at first. It was a dreary country, all flat ferns and dismal morasses, with stubby willow trees growing in monotonous rows, and here and there a windmill, with its arms outlined against the leaden sky, like some grotesque monster beckoning to one. And it was long past sunset when I finally arrived at Bolton Hall—an old red brick mansion, many-gabled, and overgrown with fluttering trails of ivy.

“‘It's a lonesome place, miss,' said the post-boy, who had driven me over from Earsley, the nearest railway station. 'I had a sister as was at service here once; but nobody stays long at Bolton Hall.'

“It was all nonsense for me to take any notice of a servant’s idle chatter, but my mind was just in the morbid mood to be influenced by trifling things, and somehow the post-boy’s words made me feel a little low-spirited. But the next minute the doors opened, and I saw a great, octagonally shaped hall, hung with dark crimson tapestry, and lighted up by the shifting gleams of a huge fire of crackling logs, for the evening was chilly, although we were at the prime of midsummer; and the sweetest old lady you ever saw, in black satin robes and Valenciennes lace, with curls as white as spun silver, and a complexion like a winter rose, came forward to meet and welcome me.

“‘You are Miss Barbara Ryerson?’ she said, cordially extending to me a soft white hand, sparkling with rich rings. ‘I am Lady Bolton; and here,’ with a smile, ‘is your little pupil.’

“And in an instant, a pretty child, with a streaming cloud of golden hair about her face, had run into my arms.

“‘Grandmamma!’ piped the child, ‘I know I shall like her! She is pretty, and soft-voiced, and she hasn’t got green spectacles like old Miss Moiser!’

“And I kissed the fresh, dimpled lips, again and again, for who could help loving an innocent, frank little creature like this?

“The old lady smiled indulgently.

“‘Take Miss Ryerson to her room, Victorine,’ she said, ‘and help her remove her things, for tea will be served in fifteen minutes.’

“I fell in love with my room at once. It was a large, low-ceiled apartment, and walls tinted of a delicate peach-bloom, and the floor covered with a brown carpet whose pattern reminded one of red and russet autumn leaves all over it, and deep latticed windows hidden with red moreen hangings. And when we came down stairs again, little Victorine hanging fondly to my hand, Lady Bolton was awaiting us in a great room where the evening lamp cast a circle of soft light in one particular spot, and all the rest lurked in mysterious shadow. I could see a curious red glow at one end, which I afterward made out to be the low setting moon shining through a great stained-glass window, and there was a rustle of tapestried hangings in the distant corners whenever a door was opened or shut by the grey-headed butler, or the brisk, pink-ribboned little maid in waiting. It was all eerie enough, and yet not unpleasant.

“Lady Bolton talked to me, after we had drunk our tea, about Victorine, who sat with her sunshiny head in the old lady’s black satin lap, and her big blue eyes fixed dreamily upon me; about her proficiency in this particular study, or her backwardness in that; and gave me one or two hints concerning the child’s peculiar temperament and characteristics.

“‘I am very glad that you are young, Miss Ryerson,’ she said, with a smile. ‘There is a healthy atmosphere about youth that is especially needed, in a spot like this, where a young child and an old woman are thrown constantly together.’

“‘Are you two the only members of the family?’ I ventured to ask.

“‘We are all alone together, Victorine and I,’ she answered, her white, slender fingers straying thoughtfully through the little thing’s meshes of golden hair.

“‘She is an orphan, then?’

“‘Perhaps Lady Bolton did not hear my question, for she immediately began to talk of something else, and I had no opportunity to repeat it.

“‘You must be tired,’ she said the old lady, presently, rousing herself from something like a reverie. ‘You have had a long and wearisome journey today, and I am selfishly forgetting all but myself.’

And she rang the bell for lights, and a servant to conduct me to my room.

“‘Lady Bolton was right. I *was* very weary; so much so that, notwithstanding my resolution to lie awake and think over this auspicious beginning of my new life, I drifted away into the sound sleep almost the moment my head touched the lavender-scented pillows.

“‘I do not know whether I had been dreaming one hour or three, when I suddenly awoke, oppressed by the strange, mesmeric consciousness of some other presence in the room than my own; and, to my surprise and terror, the light from a shaded lamp was falling full on my face, and a tall figure, with a face as white as the whitest alabaster, and arrayed in a sort of a loose cashmere gown, belted at the waist with blue silk cord and tassels, stood close at my bedside.

“‘What is the matter—what has happened?’ I cried, sitting up in bed, and wildly pushing the falling hair back from my forehead, upon which a chilly dew of sudden terror had oozed out.

“‘Rise! rise!’ huskily whispered my strange visitant, ‘for you are in mortal danger!’

“‘What danger—where?’ I gasped.

“‘Do you know what has become of the last governess who was here? of the one before her?’ asked the stranger, with a peculiar smile on her face.

“‘No.’

“‘I will tell you, then; they were *murdered*—murdered in their beds—murdered just as you are fated to be, unless you heed my words, before this night is another hour older.’

“‘Impossible! I cried, falling back upon the common sense of the thing. ‘Who should murder me? for what possible reason?’

“*Insane* people do not always stop to reason,’ was the clam reply. ‘If you do not believe me, I can show you where their dead bodies are lying now. The time grows short; will you remain here to perish, or will you consult your own safety by instant flight with me?’

“‘But who are you?’

“‘Your friend, and the enemy of secret murderesses. The time is flying fast—will you go or stay?’

“‘I will go with you!’ I cried, springing to my feet, and beginning, with trembling hands, to throw on the various articles of dress that came first to my grasp. ‘But,’ and I paused an instant, scarcely able to comprehend the startling events of the moment, ‘what sort of place, then, is this Bolton Hall?’

“‘A hell upon earth—a charnel-house—a place where they shut innocent people up to die living deaths!’ was the slowly uttered response; an answer which made the blood run cold in my veins. ‘But you need not fear, now that I have come to your rescue. I will conduct you to a haven of safety where none can harm you. Only be silent and speedy.’

“I followed her, with limbs that trembled so that they would hardly support me, into the hall, and thence down a narrow, winding stairway, which led through a side door, into the starlighted silence of the night. The dew sprinkled my dress, as I hurried along the box-edged paths; mysterious shadows of aspen, laurel and willow trees lay in dark bars across the velvet-smooth grass, and here and there a night-bird shrieked through the thickets of dense-growing shrubbery—still we kept on, on until the rushing sound of water warned me that we were approaching a stream of no inconsiderable magnitude.

“‘Suddenly my silent conductress turned into an alley leading to the left, and unlocked the door of a small building of some sort.

“‘Stay here until I return,’ she whispered, ‘and fear nothing!’

“But, in spite of her injunction, I did feel a strange, inward quaking as I heard the key turned once more in the lock, and knew that I was quite alone, at the dead of night, in a strange place. By the dim starlight, shining through high latticed windows, I could see that a narrow wooden bench ran round three sides of the place, and that a flight of steps extended down to the water’s edge on the fourth. Evidently I was in a boat-house, and, somewhat reassured, I sat down on the nearest end of the bench, to try and still my throbbing heart, and convince myself that all would be well. My rescuer would doubtless soon return and then I should be enabled to make good my escape.

“As I sat there, huddled up and shivering in the chilly night air, with the rush of the water sounding like a mournful monotone in my ears, I could not but ask myself, over and over again, what was the meaning of this strange combination of circumstances? Did such death-traps actually exist in a country like this? If so, where were safety and security to be found? And I trembled afresh at the bare idea of the terrible peril in which I had so unconsciously stood. It was

like a hideous nightmare, or some fearful delusion of a fever-racked brain; yet, I knew quite well that I was neither asleep, nor delirious. No, it was the truth—the terrible truth; one of those fearful adventures which come to people perhaps once in the course of a lifetime, but not oftener. The sweet-voiced old lady, who had welcomed me with such a show of hypocritical kindness, the laughing, radiant-haired child, who had hung so fondly about me—I shuddered as I remembered those occurrences, and people of the night before. Only the night before! To me it seemed a period removed from my present by the long lapse of years!

“Thus I waited there, shivering, trembling, palpitating! I waited, and still nobody came. I listened intently, but all the sounds that I could hear were the rustling of the woodbine which overhung the lattice, swaying back and forth in the dreary night-wind, the shrill cry of summer insects, and the restless plaining of the river at my feet—and still the longed-for footstep of the rescuer came not. And a new thrill and shudder came over me as I suddenly chanced to remember the post-boy’s words:

“‘Nobody stays long at Bolton Hall!’

“And then, like a tender, reassuring smile, the dawn began to crimson rosily, and yellow light to creep in where the stars and the darkness had reigned hitherto. It was morning once more. God’s new day was born, pearl-browed and radiant, into the world. And, with the shine and the glitter, new strength and confidence came into my gradually sinking heart. Surely, surely my white-robed conductress would not linger long now!

“But the minutes crept by, slowly lengthening themselves into hours, and the vague, horror-stricken fear was borne in upon me that I had been utterly forgotten in my solitude. As this impression seized on me, I sprang madly to my feet, rattling at the locked door with all my feeble strength, shaking the mullions of the lattices, crying wildly out for help. But the dreary echoes of my own voice, and the weird cry of startled birds, were all that came back to me.

“With a new inspiration, that was like a glimmer of hope, I hurried down the broad wooden steps. Why had I not thought of this before? I had never been taught to manage a boat, but I believed that I could do so, in case of extremity; and here, at least, would be a means of escaping from a prison-house which began to be indescribably frightful to me.

“But, to my dismay, I perceived that no boat was there, only the iron staples and rusted, hanging chains, to which, in former times, a boat had probably been attached, and, with a low groan of utter despair, I seated myself on the lower step, my dress dipping unheeded in the sparkling current whose sunlit splendor seemed to mock my desperation with its joyous glitter. I could see the course of the stream for some distance on either side, as it wound through low, flat meadows, with alder-bushes fringing either side, and pollard willows uplifting their silver-grey foliage; but there was no dwelling nor other sign of human presence to be discerned, and the utter solitude and isolation of the place weighed upon my soul with a fearful incubus. Was I to starve to death here? to perish by slow agonies? I clasped my hands involuntarily together, and the incoherent fragment of a wild prayer broke [aloud] from my lips[.]

“And the sun, mounting higher and higher in the blue, cloudless heaven, withdrew its chequers of gold from the floor of the boat-house, and the day grew older and more radiant without, while I, silent and almost stupefied with hunger, fright and exhaustion, sat, like a motionless log, on the step, leaning my throbbing head against the rough boards that formed the siding; for I was quite past exertion now—I could only await my fate.

“It must have been past noon when the welcome sound of human voices broke in upon the dreadful trance of solitude which had come upon me, like a slow, creeping numbness, and I involuntarily started up.

“‘There’s foot-tracks here, plain enough, and the branches is broke down,’ said a gruff accent. ‘I only hopes she ‘asn’t been and murdered the poor young lady!’

“I lifted up my choked voice with a feeble cry for aid. Faint and tremulous though it was, it was heard, and responded with a ‘Hal-lo-o-o!’ that shook the very timbers of the building like a roar of thunder.

“‘ ‘Ere she is, or I’m no better than a land-lubber!’ bellowed the gruff voice. ‘ ‘Ere she is, my lady! But, shiver my timbers, if the best-‘ouse door ain’t locked!’

“‘Break in the door at once, Stephens!’ cried Lady Bolton’s soft voice, agitated enough now. ‘Oh, merciful Heaven! who can tell what may have happened?’

“‘There ain’t a-many bolts, or bars neither, as can stand agin *my* shoulder!’ growled the first tones. ‘So, ‘ere goes! One, two, three, *and*—begin!’

“And then there came a mighty sound, like the cleaving and splintering asunder of beams, and the crash of splitting boards, and the next moment I was clasped in Lady Bolton’s arms.

“‘My dear! my dear!’ she faltered. ‘I am so glad, so grateful to see you alive once again!’

“I heard no more. A blinding darkness came over my eyes, the rush of the river seemed to fill my ears with thunderous, confusing echoes, and I knew nothing further until I found myself on the sofa in Lady Bolton’s own room, with little Victorine’s blue eyes watching wistfully over me, and the faint sweet odor of cologne and scented waters permeating all the air.

“And then, when I was able to listen collectedly, Lady Bolton gave me the entire clue to the frightful mystery, which had so nearly proved fatally disastrous to me.

“‘It was Victorine’s poor mother, my dear,’ she said, sorrowfully, stroking down my hand as she spoke. ‘She has never had her senses since my son was killed in a duel, eleven years ago this very month. But we dreaded gossip and exposure, and never could endure the thought of sending her to an asylum, though she has always been kept under what we supposed the strictest surveillance in private apartments at the Hall. But last night her keeper—a very respectable and steady woman, my dear, and an old servant of the family—got over-tired, and slept soundly than was her wont. And so poor Helen, who had chanced to witness your arrival from her window,

and whose mind is always more disturbed than usual at this period of the year, in which her husband met his death, contrived to steal away her keys, and crept to your room with the stealthy cunning of insanity. All the rest you yourself know. It was a mercy that she did not either destroy or seriously injure you, or herself. As it was, they found her half-way on the road to Earsley, in search, as she told them, of a magistrate to whom she could confide her fancied wrongs; and she is now safe in her own rooms, under Nancy's soothing care. I have not myself been able to see or speak to her in a long time, for one of her chief delusions is that I was accessory to the murder of her husband. [‘]God knows,’ added Lady Bolton, with tears in her sweet old eyes, ‘I would have given my own useless life to have saved him to her! But, my dear you must not ask any more questions, for you are worn out, and need rest.’

“And that was the end of my adventure. I need only add that I lived at Bolton Hall eight years—until my little Victorine wore a wedding-veil; and during those years it was my lot to stand beside the death-bed of poor young Lady Bolton, whose mad freaks had terrified me so sorely on that dreadful first night at the Hall.

“For God is more merciful than man, and He set all captives free in His own good time.”

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