

# The Awakening of Priscilla

By MOLLIE E. JAMIESON

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## CHAPTER I.



UNTIL Betsy, the maid of all work, entered the old ladies' employment, Priscilla, incredible as it may appear, had never so much as guessed that a birthday might, upon occasion, necessitate presents and present-giving. The old ladies were Priscilla's great-aunts, and had brought her up in accordance with their own early training. Law, not love, was the key-note of the old ladies' regime, and Priscilla was the chief sufferer thereby.

Into this maiden establishment, served long and faithfully by elderly Hannah, but lately espoused by a widower green-grocer, entered, like some unexpected gust of wild spring weather, Betsy, youthful, romantic, and red-headed. The old ladies would never have tolerated Betsy for a moment, had she not been Hannah's niece, and, therefore, recommended by Hannah. In time, with rigid rule and painstaking training, her mistresses hoped to transform Betsy into just such an exemplary handmaiden as Hannah had been before her.

But the training, the excellent moral principles, the more than excellent advice which had done so much for Hannah, had little or no effect on Hannah's youthful relative. Precept, advice, even the more severe forms of condemnation, slid like so much water off a duck's back, when applied to Betsy. Their incorrigible maid-servant was the despair of the old ladies' lives, and yet, for trusted Hannah's sake, they dare not summarily dismiss her.

But while the old ladies fretted, one member, at least, of the household rejoiced in Betsy's coming. To Priscilla it seemed as though the old house had suddenly awakened up from that deadly sleep to which the rigid rule of Hannah's mistresses, the exemplary serving of Hannah herself, had so long reduced it. Betsy, and even Betsy's erratic mode of work, gave just a tinge of color to a picture which had long been grey. Betsy, with her pink wrapper, her tousled red head, and merry, blue eyes, was to Priscilla an infinitely more attractive personality than the excellent chocolate-clad Hannah had ever been. Even the fact of the joint being over-done, and the potatoes under, was in some ways a change from the dull, respectable, everyday routine. When Betsy smashed one of the best dinner plates, it was something of an epoch in Priscilla's existence. Hannah, throughout all her long service, had never so much as chipped a saucer.

To Priscilla, descending to the kitchen to iron some of her aunts' finer handkerchiefs and laces, Betsy would chat away in the most artless manner possible. It was through Betsy's conversation that Priscilla obtained most of her glimpses of that outside world of which, thanks to her elders' stern upbringing, she knew so little.

"La! Miss 'Cilla"—Betsy would persist in calling her "Miss 'Cilla," much to the old ladies' annoyance. "To think of it bein' your birthday to-morrow, an' you never so much as lookin' forward to a present." Priscilla—no doubt the old ladies would have blamed Priscilla for over-garulity—had confided as much to her sympathetic handmaid "Jim Merri-man, him that I've been walkin' out with all winter, has promised me the tip-toppest pair of gloves when mine comes along, week after next. He asked my size last Thursday night when we were out."

For by this time, Priscilla, thanks to Betsy's loquacious tongue, knew all about Jim Merri-man, the grocer's dapper young assistant, and of Jim Merri-man's "pennant" for Betsy. Sometimes, carefully brought up though she had been, she had almost envied Betsy setting out so gaily, cheeks all aglow, on Thursday evenings, to meet the chosen of her heart. Not that Priscilla coveted the attentions of Jim Merri-man—her well brought up young ladyhood hardly stooped to that; but to be necessary to someone—it was that for which her starved heart seemed constantly to be crying for. Her grey eyes were strangely wistful as she looked up from the ironing table.

"It sounds nice, Betsy; but, of course, with me it's different. My aunts would possibly not approve. Yet I wonder Hannah never spoke about how other people kept their birthdays. She must have known too."

"Aunt Hannah? She wouldn't bother herself about those sort of things," Aunt Hannah's niece averred with youthful scorn. "Never likely had a present from a sweetheart in her life, let alone anyone

else. A born old maid, if ever there was one, and a born old maid she'll stay, though she was married fifty times over. It's the mistresses I'm wonderin' at, not doin' their best to make thing cheery for you, and you the only young thing in the house," added affectionate Betsy, setting down the potato pot with a thud.

Subsequent conversations revealed the fact that Betsy had received a good many birthday presents in her day. Betsy's admirers had been many, and her swains' gifts varied, ranging from ties and gloves to chocolates and boxes of "long-bongs." Priscilla, barking half enviously, suddenly realized that her own life was dull, monotonous, grey. Was it altogether the old aunts whom she had to thank for the narrow outlook upon life which she at present enjoyed? Has Priscilla herself, by her over-meekness and docility, no hand in the matter?

A ring at the door-bell upstairs broke in upon the handmaid's recital of past conquests. Priscilla, still ironing, was revolving many things in her mind when Betsy came clattering down again, her cap awry, having successfully admitted the visitor.

"A lady to see the mistresses, and Miss Maria says, will you please go in when the tea does, Miss 'Cilla? It's that old Miss Arrol from Bournville," added Betsy, seizing the kettle, and filling it at the kitchen pipe with altogether unnecessary din.

Priscilla and the tea-tray arrived in the parlor a quarter of an hour later, together. She entered softly—the aunts had taught her that young people ought to be seen and not heard, and, having shaken hands with the visitor, proceeded with her usual duties of pouring out tea. Miss Arrol, a merry old lady, as unlike her aunts as it was possible to be, glanced up at her with a smiling nod as she handed her her cup. "Grown out of all knowledge you seem to be every time I see you, child. Nineteen to-morrow, your aunts tell me you are. Ah! I can remember when I was your age. Little I valued my youth then, and now all the riches of the world can't give me one hour of that golden time back again."

Miss Jane frowned slightly. Miss Jane was the older aunt, and possessed the strongest objection to Priscilla being brought into prominence.

"Age has its advantages, my dear Agnes"—Miss Arrol's name was Agnes. "Youth, in its inexperience, may well envy those of riper years. You may go and sit down, Priscilla. You are only standing in Miss Arrol's light."

"Now, now, as though I didn't like to have her," the good-natured spinster said. "Often I've envied the two of you having a little girl like this of your own. You sit down by me, 'Cilla—once upon a time, long enough ago, I had a little sister of my own called 'Cilla—and tell me about all the birthday presents you're expecting to-morrow. Why, when I was your age, I'd not have been able to sleep for thinking of what I was getting, and from whom. See what it is to be old. Though my birthday's to-morrow, too, same day as your own, no one would ever dream of sending me a present."

"No one has ever sent me a present either," Priscilla averred half shyly. "There are so few people that I know," she added sorrowfully and humbly. At that moment it almost seemed to her as though she had been cheated out of something in her life. Age might lay claim to experience, as Great-aunt Jane had declared; but how was experience to be gained if one had hardly even lived?

"We have always been most careful regarding Priscilla's associates," Great-aunt Maria said with dignity. "Young people are often heedless and rash as to their choice of friends; but, guarded as Priscilla has been, we have no need to reproach ourselves with any degree of laxity on that score. As regards the frivolous habit of present-giving upon birthdays of otherwise, that, at least, is one which we have always felt ought to be discouraged."

"Poor Priscilla," Miss Arrol murmured; but she said it so softly that only Priscilla, and not the aunts, heard it. "Never mind, if no one else will, I'll send you a birthday souvenir. It won't be much fun for you, I'm afraid, but it will at least be better than nothing. Nineteen only comes once in a lifetime, you know."

And the old lady nodded reassuringly, and gave Priscilla's hand an affectionate little squeeze.

## CHAPTER II.

Priscilla's "present" from Miss Arrol arrived duly upon her birthday morning. Half a dozen embroidered pocket-handkerchiefs, accompanying a card pretty enough to have emanated from the most

adoring of lovers. Priscilla had no lover—had never had a lover; but this very tangible token of her kind old friend's affection for her was certainly next best. She looked up with shining eyes.

"Isn't it good of her? Can't I go along and thank her this very morning, Aunt Jane? And oh! I wish that I had something that I could take her in return, for a birthday present."

"Don't be ridiculous, Priscilla," Aunt Jane said in condemnatory tones. "Thank

Agnes Arrol if you wish for her pretty gift; but pray do not endeavor to return it in any way. At her age, one endeavors to ignore a birthday rather than to remember it. Even when I was a girl, we had no time for such folly," added Aunt Jane, who certainly, at that period of her life, looked as unlikely a birthday-present giver or recipient as it was possible for anyone to imagine.

Priscilla, thankful to receive even so much permission, held her peace. But after breakfast was over, she hastened upstairs, and, donning her hat and coat, made a hasty exit from the house. There was always a certain fear lest Aunt Jane might repent of the permission already given, and recall to her some totally unnecessary household task. Priscilla, hastening down the faintly sunny street, reflected on the possibility of her being able to present Miss Agnes Arrol with any acceptable gift. At the florist's she paused, hesitated, and finally went in and bought a tiny pot of violets. Then she hailed the bus for Bournville.

Priscilla, though she had rarely visited Miss Arrol at Bournville before, found the house easily enough. One of a couple of villas, standing back a little from the road, and surrounded by a cheerful green paling. The maid, who answered her rather timid ring, smiled, and invited her to enter, even before she had asked if Miss Arrol was at home.

"Missus has been expectin' you all mornin', though she's not just so well to-day, miss," she volunteered as information.

Priscilla laid her pot of violets upon the table, and sat down to wait in the comfortable little room, half parlor, half study, into which she had been ushered. She had not so long to wait after all. The door opened, and a rather gloomy-faced young man entered. The gloom did not even lift from his countenance at sight of Priscilla sitting there, her little pot of purple violets beside her.

"Good morning," he said briefly. "My aunt is indisposed this morning, and has commissioned me to see you in her place. She expected you rather earlier; but I suppose the delay was unavoidable."

"I came as soon as I could," Priscilla said in a very small voice. She was too meek to resent the old lady's evident desire for immediate thanks, though she could not help wishing that it had been Miss Arrol rather than her nephew who had been there in person to receive them.

"Oh! that's all right," he said easily. "It's only that my aunt's a bit nervous—thought there might have been a bus smash up or something of that sort when you didn't make your appearance. You haven't been from home before, I suppose?" he added, not unkindly. That the little girl with the shy grey eyes was half frightened of him, Basil Norwood had realized on the moment, and this young man, albeit gloomy of countenance, did not care to be held in unnecessary awe.

"Never without one of my aunts," Priscilla informed him. "As far as Bournville, I mean. But I found the house quite easily. It wasn't that that kept me. I suppose we must just have had breakfast later this morning," added Priscilla, seeking still further to appease this austere questioner.

"It was hardly that I meant," he flushed all over his handsome face. "Staying from home, rather. I gather," flushing again, "from your appearance, that you are very young. It must only be quite recently that you have done with school."

It was now Priscilla's turn to flush. What a strange young man this was, to be sure. But, perhaps, like Priscilla herself, he was shy, and the abruptly novel nature of his conversation might merely be the result of nervous "gaucherie." If such were the case, Priscilla felt that she could sympathize with him if anyone could.

"I never was at school. My aunts preferred that I should be taught at home. And I am not so young as I look. Everyone says so. Nineteen is not so very young, is it?"

"It is hardly a patriarchal age," he told her, smiling in spite of himself; for there was something in Priscilla's childish naïveté which was unexplainably refreshing. "Forgive me for the impertinence of my inquiry. That is one of the things, I am told, which the twentieth-century young lady usually prefers to keep to herself."

"Why, I wonder?" For Priscilla, living far apart from the world and its wiles as she had hitherto done, was singularly ignorant on such matters. "My aunts are always telling me how young I am; but then, one of them is over eighty, and that is really old," added Priscilla, as though nothing short of the age of the renowned Methuselah could have in any way appealed to her.

And then she remembered the real purpose of her coming, and lifted the little pot of violets from the table.

"'Twas the only thing I could think of,

Your aunt likes flowers, doesn't she? And violets—I always think there are no flowers like violets."

"Violets." He smiled back at her, the gloom altogether gone from his handsome face. "Aren't they sweet, too?" He drew the little pot towards him, as though the better to inhale the fragrance. "They take me back to the time when I was a little chap. We used to grow just such violets as those in the dear old rectory garden at home. Such a time ago it seems, almost a lifetime, and I thought I'd forgotten. But there are some things we can't forget, hard as we try."

"But that—you'd always want to remember that." Priscilla's grey eyes were half wistful as she spoke. "I've nothing like that in my life—only always the same, the old house, the old aunts. Sometimes I think that it will never be different. The world beyond, and me here—always here. Only perhaps when I grow old, like the old aunts, I shan't mind so much."

The man, still bending over the violets, glanced up. His dark eyes met hers with a sudden, answering, understanding flash.

"Not mind? Why, child, don't you know that it's the passing away of your own beautiful youth, above all, which will leave you broken-hearted? When that is gone—so little else matters. We're so wearied, with no heart for the brave fight we might once have undertaken, had fetters not bound our hands. We are not content, not even resigned, only helpless. Surely there are bigger things to be got out of life than mere 'not minding'?"

"Oh, then, you know—you know, too?" Priscilla stretched out her little hand, and, across the violets, their grasp met. "I had fancied that no one understood—knew. For life is beautiful, isn't it, and to be shut out from it all—that's what seems the very hardest. Not that it's the aunts' fault; don't imagine that for a moment. It's only that they can't—will never understand."

And then, with a sudden revulsion of feeling, Priscilla stood up, blushing furiously. To confide thus in an utter stranger those thoughts which as yet she had hardly realized she possessed—whatever could she have been thinking of? Only, he hardly seemed a stranger now. Those later confidences had brought them very near together.

"I must be going," Priscilla said, a little stiffly. "Will you tell your aunt how sorry I am that she is—indisposed."

"But you must come up and see my aunt," he said, almost eagerly. "It was only those—preliminaries that I was commissioned to arrange. She would naturally prefer an interview with you herself."

The nephew carried the little pot of violets in his hand as they went up the long stairs. In the cosy little room they presently entered, an old lady sat by the fire in a high-backed chair. She glanced round a little impatiently.

"I thought you were never coming, Basil. It is quite an hour, I am sure, since I heard the doorbell ring. Give the young woman that chair where I can see her face."

But Priscilla did not at once accept the chair the nephew, thus commanded, proffered her. There was a startled look in her grey eyes as she met the searching glance of the irate old lady. For the moment the girl felt not unlike Little Red Riding Hood of the children's fairy tale, who, coming to visit kindly Grandmamma, finds Grandmamma mysteriously vanished, and the snarling wolf in her place.

"What are you staring at, may I ask, child?" the wolf inquired sharply. "One would think you had never seen a sick woman before. You may leave us now, Basil. I shall arrange matters with this young—ahem, person myself."

"Oh, no, don't go away," Priscilla turned desperately to her one friend, now about to desert her. "It's all a mistake, and I don't know what's the matter. It was Miss Arrol I came to see—Miss Arrol, who sent me my birthday present. Oh, I am afraid that there is some very terrible mistake," poor Priscilla said.

Then the wolf did a very extraordinary thing for a wolf to do. The wolf began to laugh. The nephew was very far from laughing. He was too much concerned over Priscilla's grief for mirth.

"Why, the poor, dear, silly child has somehow got herself into the wrong house," said the wolf, who, upon closer acquaintance, did not seem to be such a bad old wolf after all. "Miss Arrol stays next door, and I suppose, the two houses being so much alike, you somehow wandered in here instead. Fooled that brilliant nephew of mine too, most successfully. He undertook to interview an intending 'companion help,' who promised to call this morning, and this is the result. He must have conducted his interrogations very cleverly to keep you in the dark so long."

"Oh, I see," Priscilla said slowly. She raised her eyes to the nephew's face, the dawning of a smile chasing away their distress. The nephew, who had been looking singularly discomfited, thereupon smiled too. Perhaps he recalled the pleasing fact, that, though in that interesting category of questions which he had put to Priscilla, he had asked her several things, after all, Priscilla had told him even more than he had asked.

"You've got to forgive me," he told her now. "I thought my aunt was in luck's way for once; but it's evidently not to be." The nephew hardly acknowledged, as he spoke, that the regret was as much

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