Jane Murray's Thanksgiving Story

Rebecca Harding Davis

Table of Contents

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IT was late in October and the Woman's Academy of Starboro was waking from its Summer's doze, and making ready for the Winter's work. The Academy, being a feeder for a great Woman's College, stood, so its prospectus declared, "in the van of the Movement for the Highest Development of Woman." Even the gardeners, who were taking up the dead leaves on the great lawns which sloped from the pillared porches to the bay, and the scrubbers, flooding the classrooms, their skirts pinned up and their heads swathed in dusty cheesecloth, worked as if they knew the tremendous importance of this building to the world's progress.

Miss Clemens, the Principal, gave them a stately nod of approval. She knew that they would not work so hard in an ordinary house. "Even these poor shreds of womanhood are driven by the Zeit−Geist upward — upward!" She repeated the word aloud. She always felt that the spirit of a great reformer was on fire within her gaunt, tall body.

She went round the veranda to find the painters, who should have been at work days ago, and observed that the windows of the apartment occupied by the Professor of Literature were open. She stopped, catching her breath with a look of annoyance.

"Has Professor Murray arrived?" she asked a passing scrubber.

"If you mean Mrs. Jenny Murray, she come here days ago. She's gettin' her rooms ready for school. They'll be as nate as two pins by tonight."

The Principal walked on, uncertainly, forgetting the delinquent painters. Of course, the Irish woman would take part with Mrs. Murray! That woman always had a singular attraction for the lower classes. All the servants treated her as if she were the head of the school! She sat down on a bench, digging holes in the sward with her umbrella. She had meant to write to Professor Murray that night a letter conveying certain unpleasant tidings. But as she was here, she must give her the information at once. The Principal was seriously annoyed. Not because her message would be as a sentence of death to the older woman. She had not imagination enough to enter into the pain of any other human being than herself. But she knew that she should have given the information months ago.

"I shall be criticised because I did not tell her in the Spring!" she said. Trustees, parents, all the other dull folk with whom the world was filled were always criticising her! The water stood in her pale eyes at the thought of how little she was appreciated.

At that moment Jane Murray put the last book into its shelf, and looked around, smiling, at her little apartment. How homelike and tranquil her old rooms were. The very place, she thought, for a young girl to first hear the truths which the thinkers of the world had brought into it.

For to this little teacher the study of Literature was an actual daily companionship with the leaders of human thought. Her girls had plodded with Cicero to his farm, and loitered thru the muddy lanes of Stratford with Shakespeare; they had been barred with Savonarola into the cell at St. Mark's, and hated as fiercely as he did the mob outside; they had strolled on the Strand with Lamb and Dickens and Thackeray, and loved with them its old shops and homes and ways.

When Jane Murray's husband and baby died, leaving her alone in the world, she had slowly taken these great living folk in books into her life, making them her friends and companions. Then she made them the friends and companions of her scholars. She had begun with a class which soon grew into a school. An idea went abroad that she gave to her pupils a hungry desire to learn. Besides, she had a curious charm of manner and speech, and anxious parents sent their daughters to her — as Northern girls now are sent to certain schools in Virginia and Maryland — that they might be trained, not so much into scholars as gentlewomen.

When the founders of the present Academy wished to establish it at Starboro, they found this prosperous, old−fashioned school already there, and proposed to Mrs. Murray that they should take it, enlarge and rechristen it (tho in fact Jane's school had no name), giving her charge of the Department of Literature. She was greatly flattered and pleased, and promptly accepted the offer. Some of her friends whispered that the good−will of the school should have been bought for a certain sum in cash. But Jane Murray seldom considered sums in cash. She hardly noticed that her salary was small. It was all that she needed for her board and clothes. For nine years now she had been busy bringing raw, well−meaning farmer's daughters into the presence of the great thinkers and seers of all ages, giving to the dullest girl a belief that she, too, could gain some help from them in her long journey.

When Mrs. Murray came up to her window and saw Miss Clemens' lean figure approaching, she shrugged her shoulders and drew back. Secretly she considered the Principal a bore, and seldom wasted time with her. The next moment a strange figure on horseback came thru the gate, and Jane drew still farther out of sight. That was Maria Price. How big and loud she had been, even as a girl, when she took the course in Literature, and called Scott a vaporing old humbug, and threw Dante down, declaring that American girls would do better to study the ins and outs of a Presidential election rather than the hell and heaven of a crazy Italian. She had gone into all sorts of public work, now that she had come into her money. She wore a coat and trousers of Khaki, and sat on the horse like a man. Jane, when she saw that, shivered and turned her back.

Maria, at that moment, alighted and was talking to Miss Clemens. She was a trustee of the Academy, and one of its largest stockholders.

"School opens next week, and you have not yet told her she is to go!" she exclaimed.

Miss Clemens lost color. "That is all right! I will attend to that duty in season. I have provided her successor."

"Successor? I should say so! The girls must have no more of such fancy training; they must go thru the regular textbooks to make ready for the college exams. I tried them last spring on a page of dates — births and deaths of English writers — and they all flunked by a dozen years. On which Mrs. Murray remarked: 'It is not as important that the girls should know when these men lived as why they lived.' But what about her salary? What provision has she?"

"Oh, no doubt she has saved plenty of money. What expenses had she? A widow with not a human being of her kin."

"What's that? No kin? She's not young, either. Nigh to seventy, I should say." Maria struck her yellow trousers with her whip. "Well, you can tell her she's got to go. I'm off. I don't like the job," she said, jumping into the saddle.

Even Miss Clemens felt an uneasy qualm of pity as she sat in Mrs. Murray's pretty room ready for her task. What if the woman had not saved any money? Why were these unpleasant jobs in life always laid on her?

She bowed and smiled, however, as she delivered her message, and was pleased at her own fluency. But Mrs. Murray was unusually dull. She rose uncertainly, staring at the other woman.

"I don't understand. I am to give up my school?" she said.

"Oh, really! Your school! We may as well face facts, my dear madam. You are only a teacher here. The trustees consider that another system of instruction would be better for the school — questions and answers learned by rote from text−books. In fact, we have secured the services of Professor Johns in your place. He is himself, as you know, a well−known author."

"No, I never wrote anything," said Jane with a dreary laugh. Her eyes wandered over the class−room, the cases of old books, the dainty little chamber with its easy chair and wood fire on the hearth.

"You mean — that I am to go away from here?"

"Of course. This wing is the Department of Literature, and Professor Johns — " Miss Clemens rose with an air of finality. "Be assured, madam, you will carry with you the best wishes of the Trustees and Faculty. I hope you have made provision for a comfortable old age?" she added, with a curious glitter in her light eyes.

But Jane had come to herself now. It never had been her habit to make comrades of strangers.

"I have no reason to dread the future," she said, smiling. There always was something in the little woman's carriage of her head, with its rolls of white hair, and the gleam in her dark blue eyes, which made Miss Clemens feel dull and awkward.

"I am glad you are provided for," she said; "you could not expect to find any position elsewhere. The modern custom of discharging all employees at seventy obtains with women as with men; no chance for them. Too bad, but so it is!" Then she bowed herself out with a smile.

Jane shut the door and went back into the room, stooping to pick up a roll of paper which she had dropped. It was her lecture to beginners on folk−lore, that first groping of the human mind for enduring expression. She opened it, and then suddenly let it fall.

"Why, I shall not use it!" she cried. "I never shall use it again! I am not to teach anybody any more! Not my girls! What does it mean? I am nothing — nothing in the world!"

She sat for a long time, her hands over her eyes. An hour ago she had power over many human lives. She thought she had a great work to do. Now her hands were empty. She was thrown out useless into the highway, and her work was given to a cheap, tawdry pretender.

She turned, shivering, to stir the fire, and then stopped.

"I have no right here! Professor Johns — I have no home," she said, with a queer laugh. "I told her I had no reason to dread the future. I had some dull notion that God would take care of me."

Some sudden thought made her turn to her desk and take out her pocket−book.

"Ten dollars and a half," she said, staring out into the gathering twilight, "and that is all, every cent I have! There is not more coming anywhere. That is all I've brought out of my work of seventy years!"

Just then she saw Miss Clemens driving out of the gate in her new victoria, the coachman in livery.

"I've done better work than she in the world," she muttered.

And then Jane Murray, as most of us have done some time in life, when we were worsted or tortured, called God to account. Had this dumb, unseen Force that put her here no sense of pity or justice? If men were cruel, why did He not interfere? Was He blind or deaf?

She cried out to the gray darkness overhead:

"I have worked hard for seventy years, and my hands are empty! Is that right? Is that just?"

But there was no answer.

Jane's ten dollars took her to Plowden. Plowden was the old Murray farm on the Shenandoah. They had sold it all but two acres of stony land and the old farmhouse, which was a wreck. Jane had owned it, but eight years ago, when her Cousin Polly Vance's husband had a stroke, Jane had put them into it. It had at least a roof to cover them. Her salary went down to Plowden regularly until Jim Vance died, and Polly sent it back, declaring she "could fend for herself." A year later, she bought the old place from Jane.

Now, in her extremity, Mrs. Murray remembered the old shanty and Polly's kind face, and betook herself to them. Two days had passed since she left the school. They seemed like a waste of years. One reason for this was that whenever she knelt, from habit, at night, she quickly scrambled to her feet again.

"I have nothing to say to Him!" she would say. "He has forgotten me."

When she reached the little station, there was Polly with a stout mare and a buckboard, her face red and beaming. She eyed Jane's boxes of books.

"Don't tell me you've given up the school, and have come here to stay! I can't believe there is such luck ahead for me!" she gasped. "And me just going to advertise! to scour the country for a partner."

"I have no money for any business," said Jane, and tried to tell her story.

"It's not money I want," interrupted Polly. "It's brains, and a woman who will take an interest. To get Jane Murray! Heavens! What luck! What a Thanksgiving we will have next week!"

"I — keep — Thanksgiving?" muttered Jane.

Polly's keen, gray eyes flashed on her, and then she flicked the old mare.

"Get on, Coley! Well, I say, what luck!" she muttered again.

The road wound thru the hills, gorgeous in their fall robes of crimson and gold; below was the Shenandoah roaring over its rocky bed — always the most picturesque of American rivers.

"There's your farm!" said Polly, as they came thru a gap. The old farmhouse, solid and comfortable, stood on a hill surrounded by orchards, gardens and clusters of bee−hives. Its windows shone with welcome.

"What does this mean?" said Jane. "How have you done it?"

"Bees and chickens, child. Nothing else. I began with one hive and a single clutch of eggs. But they were the best! My trade is very good. But the farm and house are yours, Jane. I have only borrowed them from you. You gave us a roof to cover us when we were starving. You gave him a home to die in. Now — "

She choked, and neither woman spoke until they alighted at the porch.

She led Jane into the very room to which she had come as a bride. There was the same old furniture, the fire burning on the hearth, and on the walls the photographs of the "Ecce Homo" and Tintoretto's "Descent from the Cross," which Miss Clemens had refused to allow Jane to take from the walls of her room. Had Polly, then, known all about it? Had she met and worsted Miss Clemens? Had she made ready this home for life for her?

In a few days Jane had settled down to work at Polly's books. They were in dire confusion. She could earn her living here fairly, she told herself. She did not want to be a beggar. When the day's work was done the two old women, who had been young together, had a thousand things to talk over as they sipped their tea. Jane was startled to find that these gossips were more interesting to her now than were even Dante or Lamb.

About a mile from the farmhouse there was a group of cottages, called a Rest−Home, owned by a charitable organization in the city. They were filled with tired women, worn out shop girls, starving seamstresses, etc. One day Jane received a letter from Maria Price, who was President of the Board of Managers, asking her to visit the Home three times a week, to read to the inmates, or talk to them, to give them some knowledge of books and of the help and comfort to be gained from them. A liberal salary was to be given for the work.

Jane went at once to the Home, and met Maria, who received her with marked deference. Jane was only coldly civil, tho the other woman wore skirts now, and not yellow trousers.

"You will take the work?" she said. "I thought it would attract you. The minds of these women need new, stirring ideas of life as much as their starving bodies need bread. Nobody can give it to them so well as you."

"Yes," said Jane, "I will take it. But no salary. It is enough for me to have my own work in the world again to do."

Maria was silent a moment.

"As you choose. Whatever will make you happiest while you live."

Jane suddenly rose and came up to her.

"Why did you give me this thing?" she said. "You took my work away from me — "

Maria, too, rose.

"Yes, there's no time to train the modern young woman by your dawdling methods, Mrs. Murray. But you — I want your old age to be warm and full. Do you remember when I was an ugly, coarse child, years ago, one day I fought with some boys and was thrown into the mud and hurt, how you took me to your room, and bathed and put me in your own bed? You forget? I don't, then. Good−bye. We needn't talk things over. We understand it is all right between us."

In a day or two letters began to come to Jane, letters from all sorts and conditions of women — the scholars whom she had taught and helped by little and great kindnesses. They had heard of her dismissal, and they sent gifts to her — sometimes, even, money, but always the tenderest love and sympathy. She sent the money back. But the love and tenderness stayed with her and slowly made the days warmer and the world brighter. Never had the woods worn such gorgeous splendor. Never was a home so cozy and pleasant as this, or a comrade so considerate as Polly.

On Thanksgiving morning a light flutter of snow fell on the woods and carpet of red leaves below. Jane stood at her window, looking into the bright, silent Heaven beyond.

Always silent. He was dumb, no matter how cruel life was down here, no matter how we cried to Him, He did not answer.

But as she stood there, warmed by the splendor of the day without and by the fire and homely comfort of the room within, a thought suddenly stirred her heart.

Had He not answered?

There had been a wrench and agony which drove her to Him. She had been forced to see how near she was to the end. She had been forced to consider the few steps that were between her and the end.

But she had been left her own work to do until it came. Had He done this? Was it He who had sent her from every side love and tenderness because of the poor little kindnesses which she had been able to show in the years which were gone?

Not money, not power, but a great content now filled her life.

On that Thanksgiving Day, the soul of the poor little woman abased itself as it never had done before. For she knew that she had spoken to Him and He had answered.

PHILADELPHIA, PA.