

**THE HOUSE ON THE  
MOOR**

**VOL. I.**

**BY  
Mrs. Oliphant**

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## **PREFACE.**

THIS book was overshadowed and interrupted by the heaviest grief. The author says so, not to deprecate criticism, but to crave the tender forbearance of her unknown friends.

# **THE HOUSE ON THE MOOR.**

## CHAPTER I.

IN a gloomy room, looking out through one narrow window upon a moor, two young people together, and yet alone, consumed the dreary hours of a February afternoon. The scene within doors exhibited scarcely less monotony and dreariness than did the moor without, which stretched black and heavy to the hills under a leaden sky. The room was well-sized, and lighted only by that one window, which was deeply sunk in the deep wall, and hung with terrible curtains of red moreen, enough to kill what little amount of light there was. A large dining-table, of cold, well-polished mahogany, occupied the centre of the apartment—an old-fashioned sideboard and mysterious bureau of the same character stood out darkly from the walls—and hard, angular chairs furnished forth the dining-room, as it was called—but which was, indeed, drawing-room, study, boudoir, everything to the brother and sister who held occupation of it now.

And here were none of those traces of feminine presence which one reads of in books—no pretty things, no flowers, no embroideries, nothing to cast a grace upon the dulness. Perhaps that might be partly Susan's fault; but when one lives all one's life on the borders of Lanwoth Moor, ten miles off from the humblest attempt at a town, without any money, and seeing nobody to stir one's ambition, even a girl of seventeen may be pardoned if she can make little brightness except that of her presence in her shady place. To tell the truth, nobody made much account of Susan; she was not expected to exert much influence on the changeless atmosphere of Marchmain. No one supposed her to be the flower of that solitude: any little embellishments which she tried were put

down ruthlessly; and the little girl had long ago learned, as the first duties of womankind, to do as she was bid, and hold her peace. She was seated now before the fire, making a little centre with her work upon the cold glimmer of the uncovered table. She was very fair in her complexion, with hair almost flaxen, white teeth, blue eyes, and a pretty colour. She did not look intellectual, nor interesting, nor melancholy; but sat leaning very closely over her work, because there was not much light, and Horace stood full between her and what little there was. She had a pair of scissors, a reel of cotton, and a paper of buttons on the table before her; and on the back of her chair hang a huge bag, made of printed cotton, which it was safe to believe was her work-bag. There she sat, with a little firelight playing vainly upon her dark woollen dress—a domestic creature, not very happy, but very contented, dully occupied in the silence and the gray afternoon, living a life against which her youth protested, but somehow managing to get on with tolerable comfort, as women unawakened and undisturbed do.

Of a different character altogether was the other inmate of this room. On the end of the table nearest the light lay a confusion of open books and an old-fashioned inkstand, which two instruments of learning had, it seemed, gone towards the composition of a German exercise, which appeared, half finished, and with a big blot on the last word, between them. Twenty times over, while that blurred page was being compounded, the young student had flown at the fire in silent irritability, and poked it half out; and he now stood in the recess of the window, between the red curtains, blocking up the light, and looking out with angry eyes upon the dim black blast of February rain which came with the darkness from the hills. It was certainly a dismal prospect. The very shower was not the hearty, violent shower which sweeps white over a

landscape in vehement sheets of water; it had not a characteristic of storm or vitality about it; but, saturating, penetrating, invisible, went chill to the heart of the sodden land, if heart was in that wild, low stretch of blackened moss and heather, where nothing living moved. The young man stood in the window, looking out with a vexation and dull rage indescribable upon the falling night. He had this only in common with Susan, that his features were cast in an unheroic type, and could only have been handsome under the influence of good humour and good spirits, two beneficent fairies unknown to that lowering face. Good health and much exercise kept the colour on his cheeks and the light in his eye—against his will, one was tempted to suppose. He was short-sighted, and contracted his eyes in his gaze out, till the eyelids hung in heavy folds over the stormy stare which he sent across the moor—and querulous lines of discontent puckered the full youthful lips, which were made for a sweeter expression. Weariness, disgust, the smouldering rage of one oppressed, was in his face. He was not only in unnatural circumstances, but somebody had injured him: he carried his head with all the loftiness and superiority of a conscious victim; but it was evident that the sentiment of wrong—just or unjust—poisoned and embittered all his life.

“Rain!” he exclaimed, jerking the word out as if he threw something at fate. “My luck!—not so much as the chance of a run on the moor!”

“Are you tired of your German already, Horace?” asked Susan, as he came to the fire to make a last attempt upon its life—lifting up her contented woman’s face, not without the shadow of a smile upon it, to her restless brother.



“Tired? D’ye think I’m a child or a girl like you? Do you think I can spend my days over German exercises? What’s the good of it? Have *I* a chance of ever using that or any other language, unless, perhaps, as a beggar? Pshaw!—look after your work, and don’t aggravate me.”

“But it would please papa,” said Susan, with some timidity, as if this was rather a doubtful argument; “and then, perhaps he might be persuaded to do what you wish, Horace, if you tried to please *him*.”

“To please papa,” said her brother, imitating her words with contemptuous mockery, “is an inducement indeed. To please *him*! Why should I please him, I should like to know? What has he ever done for me? At least, I shan’t cheat him with a false submission. I’d rather chuck the lot of them into the fire, than have him suppose that I read German, or anything else, for *his* sake!”

“But oh, Horace, you would make me *so* unhappy!” said Susan, with a little unconscious gesture of entreaty, letting her work fall, and clasping her hands as she looked up in his face.

“I suppose so,” said the young man, with perfect indifference.

“And you don’t care?” cried his sister, moved to a momentary overflow of those sudden tears of mortification and injured affection which women weep over such cool, conscious, voluntary disregard. “I would do anything in the world for you, but you don’t mind how I feel; and yet there are only two of us in the world.”

“So much the better,” said Horace, throwing himself down in a chair before the fire; “and as for those vain professions, what is the use of them, I should like to know? What *could* you do for me, if

you were ever so anxious? Anything in the world, in our circumstances, means simply nothing, Susan. Oh! for heaven's sake, don't cry!—you're a good girl, and sew on my buttons—but what, in the name of fortune, could *you* do? You know as well as I that it is only a fashion of words——”

“I did not mean it so,” cried Susan, quickly—but stopping as suddenly, cast a hurried, painful look at him, and dried her tears with a hasty hand—the look which natural Truth casts upon that cruel, reasonable fool, Wisdom, whom she cannot contest, yet knows in the wrong. A little indignation burning up upon her ingenuous cheek helped the hurried hand to dry the tears, and she returned to her work with a little tremble of haste, such as a discussion with her brother very frequently threw Susan into. She did not pretend to argue with him: she was not clever, but his philosophy filled her with impatience. She “could not bear it.” She felt inclined to get up and seize hold of him, and try physical measures to shake this arrogant pretence of truth out of him; for Susan, though she could not argue, was not without a temper and opinion of her own.

Silence ensued. Susan made nervous haste with her needlework, and stumbled over it in her little flutter of vexation; but Horace was too much absorbed to notice this girlish show of feeling. When he had rocked in his chair a little, placing one foot on the side of the old-fashioned grate, he suddenly sprang up and thrust away his seat. “By George!” cried Horace—but not as that exclamation is usually uttered, “I've not got a friend in the world!—there isn't a man in existence, so far as I know, that will do anything for me!”

“Oh, Horace!” said Susan, “think how much better off you are than some people. Don't always make the worst of everything! Think of

poor Roger Musgrave at Tillington, who has neither father nor home—his godfather dead without making any provision for him, and nothing to do and nobody to look to, poor fellow—and breaking his heart for grief besides, and Peggy says will either 'list or die!”

“And a very good alternative too,” said Horace; “he’s very well off for a poor milk-and-water nobody—free! and able to 'list if he likes, or die if he likes, without any one troubling their head about the matter. As to home and father, I heartily wish he had my share of these precious commodities. Do you think anywhere else a man like me would sell his soul for a bed and a dinner? There! there! hold your tongue, or talk of what you understand.”

“What do I understand, I wonder,” cried Susan, “sewing on your worship’s buttons? A man like you!—you are only nineteen after all, when the truth is told.”

“I am man enough to make my own way,” said the youth, angrily; “it is not a question of years or days, if indeed you were able to judge of it at all, which you are not.”

“If I were so very certain of my own strength,” cried Susan, following up her advantage, “I’d run away, if I did not care for home, or father, or—or anybody. If I did not mind about duty or affection, or such trifles, I’d go and make my own way, and not talk of it—I would! I know something, though I’m not so wise as you. I think it’s shocking to talk discontent for ever, and gloom at everything. Why don’t you go away? Think of the great people in books, that go to London with sixpence in their pockets, and turn out great merchants—or with a tragedy, and turn out Dr. Johnson.

Think of Chatterton, whom you were reading of. You are better off a great deal than he!”

“Chatterton was a fool,” said Horace. “I promise you I’ll wait for the tide, and not shoot myself when it’s in the flow. I am much obliged for your advice. I’ve neither a tragedy nor a sixpence that I can call my own—but some of these days I’ll go.”

Pronouncing these words with slow and formal emphasis, as if he meant something dreadful, Horace marched solemnly to his German exercise, and sat down to it once more. The evening grew darker round the two; by degrees Susan’s head drooped down on her needlework, till you could see that she had been seized by a womanish panic, and was secretly putting up the linen on her knee to wipe her wet eyes. This terror and compunction worked its way silently as the early wintry night came on. By-and-by, through the quietness, which was broken only by Horace’s pen, the ashes from the grate, and a slow patter outside of the wet which dropped from the eaves, there broke a little hurried, suppressed sob. Then Susan’s white work, more distinct than herself in the twilight, went down suddenly upon the floor, and a darkling figure glided round to Horace’s side. “Oh, don’t think of it any more!” cried Susan; “it was only my ill-temper. Oh, Horace, never mind me!—don’t think of it again.”

“Think of what?” said Horace, peevishly; “what on earth do you mean, thrusting your arms about me? I did not ask to be petted, did I?—what do you mean?”

“Oh, Horace—what we were saying,” said his sister, with humility.

“What were we saying? Can I remember all the nonsense you talk?” cried the young man, shaking off her arms with

impatience—“can’t you keep to your own business, and let me alone? Oh, you wanted me to be Whittington and the cat, didn’t you?—thank you, that’s not my vocation. Isn’t it bad enough I must stand your sauciness, without standing your repentance—oh, for mercy’s sake, go away!”

Susan went away without another word, gathered her work into her big work-bag, and went out of the room, not without making it sufficiently audible that she had closed the door.

“He’s a coward! he does nothing but talk!” she said between her teeth, as she went up the dark stairs; but nobody save herself knew that her momentary passion had brought these words to Susan’s lips, and ten minutes after she would not have believed she had said them—nevertheless, sometimes passion, unawares, says the truth.

## CHAPTER II.

THE household of Marchmain consisted of four persons. The brother and sister we have already seen, their father, and one female servant. In this little interval of twilight, while Susan puts on her clean collar for dinner, and which Horace, who would rather disarrange than improve his dress, out of pure ill-humour and disrespect, spends in the dark, staring into the fire with his head between his hands, we will explain to our readers the economy of this singular household. At this hour all is dark in the solitary house. Without, the chill invisible rain, the great unbroken blackness of the moor and the night—within, an unlighted hall and staircase, with a red glow of firelight at the end of a long passage, betraying the kitchen, and a faint thread of light coming out beneath a door opposite the dining-room. Thrift, severe and rigid, reigns in this dwelling. In Mr. Scarsdale's own room a single candle burns, when it is no longer possible to read without one; but there are no lights in the family sitting-room till the dinner is placed on the table, and Peggy has nothing but firelight in the kitchen, and Susan puts on her collar by intuition upstairs. Everything is under inexorable rule and law. The family have breakfast between nine and ten, sometimes even later; for Mr. Scarsdale is not a man to modify his own habits for any consideration of suitability. From that time till six o'clock, when there is dinner, the young people see nothing of their father. He sits with them in the evening, imposing silence by his presence; and that, so far as family intercourse goes, is the chronicle of their life.

Let us enter at this door, which marks itself off from the floor of the hall by that slender line of light. It has the same prospect as the

dining-room, when there is any daylight to see it; but it is smaller than that gloomy apartment; two large bookcases, shut in by a brass network, stand out with sharp and angular corners from the walls, no attempt having been made to fill up the vacant space at either side of them, or to harmonize these gaunt pieces of furniture with anything else in the room. There are two or three chairs, which stand fixed and immovable in corners, plainly testifying that nobody ever sits there; and before the fire a library table, and in a round-backed elbow-chair the father of the house. He sits there reading with a forlorn persistence wonderful to see—reading for no purpose, reading with little interest, yet turning page after page with methodical regularity, and bending his lowering forehead on the book as if it were the business of his life. He is dark, not so much in complexion as in sentiment—a close, self-absorbed, impenetrable man. It is not difficult to perceive that he is neither a student by ardent inclination, nor by profession a searcher into books; but what is the secret of these solitary studies is hard to discover. He sits with his head leaning upon one hand, and the other turning the pages—sits often for hours in that one position. He is scarcely ever stimulated into interest, and never owns the enlivening touch of that zeal and curiosity which hunts for proofs or illustrations of a favourite theory through a dozen volumes. There is no heap of books by his side, but only one orderly volume, which is not of the class of those fantastic delightful reverie books in which studious men delight. The blank, straightforward manner in which he reads on comes to be impressive in its singularity after a time. He seems to pursue this occupation as a clerk keeps books, and counts his progress, you could imagine, by the number of the pages he has read, and by no less tangible criterion; and nothing moves the settled darkness of his uncommunicative face.

Behind him, hung by the side of the window, in the worst light of the room, is a portrait, a very common work, done by a mediocre painter, but in all probability very like its original, for the face looks down through the gloom with a real smile, which paint cannot give—a sweet, home-like, domestic woman, such another as Susan will be when the years and the hours have carried her into her own life. There can be no doubt it is Susan's mother and this man's wife. There is no other picture in the house, and he cares so little for anyone seeing this, that he has hung it in the shadows of the red moreen curtains, where nobody can distinguish the features. Most likely he knows the features well enough to penetrate that darkness; for though he sits with his back to it most usually, it is for his pleasure it is here.

Nobody knows anything about this man; he has not any family connection whatever with the house or locality. Nobody can understand why of all places in the world he should come here to the tumble-down old house on the edge of the moor, which nobody else would live in. When he came, ten years ago, the country people paid him visits—half in curiosity, half in kindness—which were never returned, till at last society dropped off entirely, even from the attempt to break upon his seclusion. To account for his ungraciousness, rumours of great crimes and great misfortunes were whispered about him; but as the novelty failed, these sunk into abeyance; and it was tacitly understood or believed now that the loss of a great lawsuit, which materially lessened his means, was the cause of his withdrawal from the world. He was then but a young man, scarcely forty; and if neither sport nor society had attractions for him then, it was not to be supposed that his heart had expanded now. He lived in a severe, rectangular, mathematical poverty, which calculated every item, and left room for no



irregularity. He kept his children rigidly within the same bounds which confined himself. If they formed acquaintances, it must needs have been at “kirk or market,” in the roads or the fields, for he strictly forbade them from either receiving or accepting invitations; while for his own part he gave a certain cold attention to their education as a duty, but spent as little time as possible in their society. It is not surprising, under these circumstances, that this gloomy and brooding man should have roused the kindred temper of his son to a slight degree of desperation, or succeeded in making the thralldom of his life very irksome to a youth who was neither amiable nor submissive, to begin with. Mr. Scarsdale did not even pretend a fatherly regard for Horace; all his life he had treated the lad with a cutting and desperate civility, which would have pierced a more sensitive child to the heart; and from his boyhood had given him a certain position of equality and rivalry, totally contrary to the relationship they really held, and which at once stimulated the pride and raised the passions of the solitary youth. This unhappy state of things had never come to a climax by any outburst of passion. Horace might be as disrespectful, as sullen, as defiant as he pleased. His father extorted a certain hard lineal obedience, but neither expected nor seemed to wish for, reverence, love, or any filial sentiment; and this aspect of affairs had become so habitual, that even Susan did not observe it. Most likely she thought all fathers were more or less the same; her whole heart of tenderness went back to her little recollection of her mother—and Mr. Scarsdale was still human so far as Susan was concerned. He was not kind certainly, but at least he seemed conscious that he *was* her father and she his child.

Notwithstanding his seclusion, his limited means, and morose habits, he still bore the appearance, and something of the manners,

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