

AT HIS GATES.

A Novel.

VOL. I.

BY MRS OLIPHANT

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AT HIS GATES.

CHAPTER I.

Mr and Mrs Robert Drummond lived in a pretty house in the Kensington district; a house, the very external aspect of which informed the passer-by who they were, or at least what the husband was. The house was embowered in its little garden; and in spring, with its lilacs and laburnums, looked like a great bouquet of bloom—as such houses often do. But built out from the house, and occupying a large slice of the garden at the side, was a long room, lighted with sky windows, and not by any means charming to look at outside, though the creepers, which had not long been planted, were beginning to climb upon the walls. It was connected with the house by a passage which acted as a conservatory, and was full of flowers; and everything had been done that could be done to render the new studio as beautiful in aspect as it was in meaning. But it was new, and had scarcely yet begun, as its proprietor said, to 'compose' with its surroundings. Robert Drummond, accordingly, was a painter, a painter producing, in the mean time, pictures of the class called *genre*; but intending to be historical, and to take to the highest school of art as soon as life and fame would permit. He was a very good painter; his subjects were truly 'felt' and exquisitely manipulated; but there was no energy of emotion, no originality of genius about them. A great many people admired them very much; other painters lingered over them lovingly, with that true professional admiration of 'good work' which counteracts the jealousy of trade in every honest mind. They were very saleable articles, indeed, and had procured a considerable amount of prosperity for the young painter. It was almost certain that he would be made an Associate at the next vacancy, and an

Academician in time. But with all this, he was well aware that he was no genius, and so was his wife.

The knowledge of this fact acted upon them in very different ways; but that its effect may be fully understood, the difference in their characters and training requires to be known. Robert Drummond had never been anything but a painter; attempts had been made in his youth to fix him to business, his father having been the senior clerk, much respected and utterly respectable, of a great City house; and the attempt might have been successful but that accident had thrown him among artists, a kind of society very captivating to a young man, especially when he has a certain command of a pencil. He threw himself into art, accordingly, with all his soul. He was the sort of man who would have thrown himself into anything with all his soul; not for success or reward, but out of an infinite satisfaction in doing good work, and seeing beautiful things grow under his hand. He was of a very sanguine mind, a mind which seldom accepted defeat, but which, with instinctive unconscious wisdom, hesitated to dare the highest flights, and to put itself in conflict with those final powers which either vanquish a man or assure his triumph. Perhaps it was because there was some hidden possibility of wild despair and downfall in the man's mind, of which only himself was aware, that he was thus cautious of putting his final fortune to the touch. But the fact was that he painted his pictures contentedly, conscientiously, doing everything well, and satisfied with the perfection of his work as work, though he was not unaware of the absence from it of any spark of divinity. He did not say it in so many words, but the sentiment of his mind was this:—"It is good work, work no man need be ashamed of. I am not a Raphael, alas! and I cannot help it. What is the good of being unhappy about a thing I cannot mend? I am doing my best; it is

honest work, which I know I don't slight or do carelessly; and I can give her everything she wants except that. I should be too happy myself if she were but content.' But she was not content, and thus his happiness was brought down to the moderate pitch allowed to mortal bliss.

She was very different from her Robert. She had been a young lady of very good connections when she first met the rising young artist. I do not say that her connections were splendid, or that she made an absolute *mésalliance*, for that would be untrue. Her people, however, had been rich people for several generations. They had begun in merchandise, and by merchandise they had kept themselves up; but to have been rich from the time of your great-grandfather, with never any downfall or even break in the wealth, has perhaps more effect on the mind than that pride which springs from family. Well-descended people are aware that every family now and then gets into trouble, and may even fall into poverty without sacrificing any of its pretensions. But well-off people have not that source of enlightenment. When they cease to be very well off, they lose the great point of eminence on which they have taken their stand; and, consequently, success is more absolutely necessary to them than it is to any other class in the community. Helen Burton besides was very proud, very ambitious, and possessed of that not unusual form of *amour propre* which claims distinction as a right—though she had not anything particular in herself to justify her claim. She had, or believed she had, an utter contempt for that money which was the foundation of her family pride; and she was, at the same time, too well endowed in mind, and too generous in temper, to be able to give herself up sincerely to worship of that rank, which, as their only perpetual superior, tantalizes the imagination of the plebeian rich, and thrusts itself

constantly before them. Helen could have married the son of a poor lord, and become the Honourable Mrs Somebody, with her mother's blessing, had she so willed. But as her will took a totally different direction, she had defied and alienated her mother, who was also a woman of high spirit, and only some seventeen years older than her only child; the consequence was that when Mrs Burton found herself abandoned and left alone in the world, she married too, as truly out of pique as a girl sometimes does when deserted by her lover; and at her death left everything she had to her husband and the two small babies, one of them younger than Helen's little Norah, whom she left behind. So that a little tragedy, of a kind not much noted by the world, had woven itself around the beginning of her married life. The mother's second marriage had not been a success, but was Helen to blame for that? Nobody said she was, no one around her; but sometimes in the silence of the night, when she alone was awake, and all her household slept so peacefully—Robert, good Robert, was not a success either, not such a man as she had hoped. She loved him sincerely, was grateful to him for his love, and for his constant regard to her wishes. But yet, in the depths of her heart,—no, not despised him, the expression is too strong,—but felt a minute shade of indignation mingled in her disappointment with him for not being a great genius. *Why* was he not a Raphael, a Titian? She had married him with the full understanding that he was such, that he would bring her sweet fame and distinction. And why had not he done it? Every time she looked at his pictures she found out the want of inspiration in them. She did not say anything. She was very kind, praising the pretty bits of detail, the wonderful perfection of painting; but Robert felt that he would rather have the President and all the Hanging Committee to pass judgment on his pictures than his wife. Her sense that he had somehow defrauded her by not

mounting at once to the very height of his profession, seemed to endow her with a power of judgment a hundred-fold more than was justified by her knowledge of art. She saw the want of any soul in them at the first glance, from under her half-closed eyelids—and it seemed to Robert that in her heart she said: 'Another pretty piece of mediocrity, a thing to sell, not to live—with no genius, no genius in it.' These were the words Robert seemed to himself to hear, but they were not the real words which, in her heart, Helen uttered. These were rather as follows:—'It is just the same as the last. It is no better, no better. And now everybody says he is at his best. Oh! when his worst begins to come, what will become of us?' But she never said an uncivil word. She praised what she could, and she went her way languidly into the drawing-room. She had come down out of her sphere to give herself to him, and he had not repaid her as she expected. He had given her love—oh, yes; but not fame. She was Mrs Drummond only; she was not pointed out where she went as the wife of the great painter. 'Her husband is an artist' was all that anybody ever said.

The effect of this upon poor Robert, however, was much worse even than it was upon his wife. Some time elapsed, it is true, before he discovered it. It took him even years to make out what it was that shadowed his little household over and diminished its brightness. But gradually a sense of the absence of that sympathetic backing up which a man expects in his own house, and without which both men and women who have work to do are so apt to pine and faint, stole over him like a chill. When anything was said against his pictures outside, a gloom in his wife's face would show him that worse was thought within. He had no domestic shield from adverse criticism. It was not kept in the outer

circle of his mind, but was allowed to penetrate down to his heart, and envelop him in a heavy discouragement. Even applause did not exhilarate him. '*She* does not think I deserve it,' was what he would say to himself; and the sense of this criticism which never uttered a word weighed upon the poor fellow's soul. It made his hand unsteady many a day when his work depended on a firm touch—and blurred the colours before his eyes, and dulled his thoughts. Two or three times he made a spasmodic effort to break through his mediocrity, and then the critics (who were very well pleased on the whole with his mediocrity) shook their heads, and warned him against the sensational. But Helen neither approved nor condemned the change. To her it was all alike, always second-rate. She did her very best to applaud, but she could not brighten up into genuine admiration the blank composure in her eyes. What could she do? There was something to be said for her, as well as for him. She could not affect to admire what she felt to be commonplace. Nature had given her a good eye, and intense feeling had strengthened and corrected it. She saw all the weakness, the flatness, with fatal certainty. What, then, could she say? But poor Robert, though he was not a great artist, was the most tender-hearted, amiable, affectionate of men; and this mode of criticism stole the very heart out of him. There is no such want in the world as that want of backing up. It is the secret of weakness and failure, just as strong moral support and sympathy is the very secret of strength. He stood steady and robust to the external eye, painting many pictures every year, getting very tolerable prices, keeping his household very comfortable, a man still under forty, healthy, cheerful, and vigorous; but all the time he was sapped at the foundations. He had lost his confidence in himself, and it was impossible to predict how he would have borne any sudden blow.

It was about this time that Mr Reginald Burton, a cousin of Helen's, who had once, it was supposed, desired to be something nearer to her, found out the house in Kensington, and began to pay them visits. The circumstances of her marriage had separated her from her own people. The elder among them had thought Helen unkind to her mother; the younger ones had felt that nothing had come of it to justify so romantic a story. So that when Reginald Burton met the pair in society it was the reopening of an altogether closed chapter of her life. Mr Burton was a man in the City in very extensive business. He was chairman of ever so many boards, and his name, at the head of one company or another, was never out of the newspapers. He had married since his cousin did, and had a very fine place in the country, and was more well off still than it was natural for the Burtons to be. Helen, who had never liked him very much, and had not even been grateful to him for loving her, received his visits now without enthusiasm; but Drummond, who was open-hearted like his kind, and who had no sort of jealousy about 'Helen's friends,' received him with a cordiality which seemed to his wife much too effusive. She would not accept the invitation which Mrs Burton sent to pay a long visit to Dura, their country place; but she could not be less than civil to her cousin when he insisted upon calling, nor could she openly resist when he carried off her husband to City dinners, or unfolded to him the benefits of this or that new society. Drummond had done very well in his profession, notwithstanding Helen's dissatisfaction with his work; and also notwithstanding her dissatisfaction, she was a good housewife, doing her duty wisely. She had a hundred a year of her own, which Drummond had taken care to have settled upon herself; but since they had grown richer he had insisted upon letting this accumulate as 'a portion for Norah,' and the two had laid by something besides. For painter-folk it will be readily seen they

were at the very height of comfort—a pretty house, one pretty child, a little reserve of money, slowly but pleasantly accumulating. And money, though it is an ignoble thing, has so much to do with happiness! Drummond, who had been quite content to think that there was a portion saving up for Norah, and to whom it had not occurred that his little capital could be made use of, and produce twenty and a hundred-fold, gradually grew interested, without being aware of it, in the proceedings of Mr Burton. He began to talk, half laughingly, half with intention, of the wonderful difference between the slowly-earned gains of labour and those dazzling results of speculation. 'These fellows seem simply to coin money,' he said, 'half in jest and whole in earnest;' 'everything they touch seems to become gold. It looks incredible——' and he wound up with a nervous laugh, in which there was some agitation. Helen had all a woman's conservatism on this point.

'It *is* incredible, you may be sure,' she said. 'How can they invent money? Some one will have to pay for it somewhere;' which was a sentence of profound wisdom, much deeper than she thought.

'So one would say,' said Drummond, still laughing; 'but nobody seems to suffer. By Jove! as much as—not to say I, who am one of the rank and file—but as Welby or Hartwell Home get for one of their best pictures, your cousin will clear in five minutes, without taking the slightest trouble. When one sees it, one feels hugely tempted'—he added, looking at her. He was one of those men who like to carry their people's sympathy with them. He wanted not acquiescence simply, but approval; and notwithstanding that he was very well used to the absence of it, sought it still. She would not—could not, perhaps—enter warmly into the subject of his pictures; but here was a new matter. He looked up at her with a

certain longing—ready, poor fellow, to plunge into anything if she would but approve.

'I hope you won't let yourself be tempted to anything, Robert, that you don't see the end of,' she said; but so gently that her husband's heart rose.

'Trust me for that,' he said joyously, 'and you shall have the first fruits, my darling. I have not as fine a house for you as your cousin can give to his wife, but for all that——'

'For all that,' she said, laughing, 'I would not change with Mrs Reginald Burton. I am not tempted by the fine house.'

'I have thought how we can make this one a great deal better,' he said, as he stooped to kiss her before he went out. He looked back upon her fondly as he left the room, and said to himself that if he wished for gain it was for her sake—his beautiful Helen! He had painted her furtively over and over again, though she never would sit to him. A certain shadow of her was in all his pictures, showing with more or less distinctness according as he loved or did not love his temporary heroine: but he knew that when this was pointed out to her she did not like it. She was anxious that everybody should know she did not sit to him. She was very indignant at the idea that a painter's wife might serve her husband as a model. 'Why should a painter's profession, which ought to be one of the noblest in the world, be obtruded upon the outer world at every step?' she said. But yet as he was a painter, every inch of him, his eye caught the *pose* of her head as she moved, and made a mental note of it. And yet she was not, strictly speaking, a beautiful woman. She was not the large Juno, who is our present type of beauty; she was not blazing with colour—red, and white, and golden—like the Rubens-

heroines of the studio; nor was she of the low-browed, sleepy-eyed, sensuous, classic type. She was rather colourless on the contrary. Her hair was olive brown, which is so harmonious with a pale complexion; her eyes hazel-grey; her colour evanescent, coming and going, and rarely at any time more than a rose tint; her very lips, though beautifully formed, were only rose—not scarlet—and her figure was slight and deficient in 'grand curves.' Her great characteristic was what the French call *distinction*; a quality to which in point of truth she had no claim—for Helen, it must be remembered, was no long-descended lady. She was the produce of three generations of money, and a race which could be called nothing but Philistine; and from whence came her highbred look, her fanciful pride, her unrealisable ambition, it would be difficult to say.

She went over the house with a little sigh after Robert was gone, professedly in the ordinary way of a housewife's duty, but really with reference to his last words. Yes, the house might be made a great deal better. The drawing-room was a very pretty one—quite enough for all their wants—but the dining-room was occupied by Drummond as his studio, according to an arrangement very common among painters. This, it will be perceived, was before the day of the new studio. The dining-room was thus occupied, and a smaller room, such as in most suburban houses is appropriated generally to the often scanty books of the family, was the eating-room of the Drummonds. It was one of those things which made Helen's pride wince—a very petty subject for pride, you will say—but, then, pride is not above petty things; and it wounded her to be obliged to say apologetically to her cousin—'The real dining-room of the house is Mr Drummond's studio. We content ourselves with this in the mean time.' 'Oh, yes; I see; of course he must want space

and light,' Reginald Burton had replied with patronising complacency, and a recollection of his own banqueting-hall at Dura. How Helen hated him at that moment, and how much aggravated she felt with poor Robert smiling opposite to her, and feeling quite comfortable on the subject! 'We painters are troublesome things,' he even said, as if it was a thing to smile at. Helen went and looked in at the studio on this particular morning, and made a rapid calculation how it could be 'made better.' It would have to be improved off the face of the earth, in the first place, as a studio; and then carpeted, and tabled, and mirrored, and ornamented to suit its new destination. It would take a good deal of money to do it, but that was not the first consideration. The thing was, where was Robert to go? She, for her part, would have been reconciled to it easily, could he have made up his mind to have a studio apart from the house, and come home when his work was done. That would be an advantage in every way. It would secure that in the evening, at least, his profession should be banished. He would have to spend the evening as gentlemen usually do, yawning his head off if he pleased, but not professional for ever. It would no longer be possible for him to put on an old coat, and steal away into that atmosphere of paint, and moon over his effects, as he loved to do now. He liked Helen to go with him, and she did so often, and was tried almost beyond her strength by his affectionate lingerings over the canvas, which, in her soul, she felt would never be any better, and his appeals to her to suggest and to approve. Nothing would teach him not to appeal to her. Though he divined what she felt, though it had eaten into his very life, yet still he would try again. Perhaps this time she might like it better—perhaps——

'If he would only have his studio out of doors,' Helen reflected. She was too sure of him to be checked by the thought that his heart might perhaps learn to live out of doors too as well as his pictures, did she succeed in driving them out. No such doubt ever crossed her mind. He loved her, and nobody else, she knew. His mind had never admitted another idea but hers. She was a woman who would have scorned to be jealous in any circumstances—but she had no temptation to be jealous. He was only a moderate painter. He would never be as splendid as Titian, with a prince to pick up his pencil—which is what Helen's semi-Philistine pride would have prized. But he loved her so as no man had ever surpassed. She knew that, and was vaguely pleased by it; yet not as she might have been had there ever been any doubt about the matter. She was utterly sure of him, and it did not excite her one way or another. But his words had put a little gentle agitation in her mind. She put down her calculation on paper when she went back to the drawing-room after her morning occupations were over, and called Norah to her music. Sideboard so much, old carved oak, to please him, though for herself she thought it gloomy; curtains, for these luxuries he had not admitted to spoil his light; a much larger carpet—she made her list with some pleasure while Norah played her scales. And that was the day on which the painter's commercial career began.

CHAPTER II.

Drummond's first speculations were very successful, as is so often the case with the innocent and ignorant dabbler in commercial gambling. Mr Burton instructed him what to do with his little capital, and he did it. He knew nothing about business, and was docile to the point of servility to his disinterested friend, who smiled at his two thousand pounds, and regarded it with amused condescension. Two thousand pounds! It meant comfort, ease of mind, moral strength, to Drummond. It made him feel that in the contingency of a bad year, or a long illness, or any of the perils to which men and artists are liable, he would still be safe, and that his wife and child would not suffer; but to the rich City man it was a bagatelle scarcely worth thinking of. When he really consented to employ his mind about it, he made such use of it as astonished and delighted the innocent painter. All that his simple imagination had ever dreamed seemed likely to be carried out. This was indeed money-making he felt—Trade spelt with a very big capital, and meaning something much more splendid than anything he had hitherto dreamt of. But then he could not have done it by himself or without instruction. Burton could not have been more at a loss in Drummond's studio than he would have felt in his friend's counting-house. Mr Burton was 'a merchant,' a vague term which nevertheless satisfied the painter's mind. He was understood to be one of the partners in Rivers's bank, but his own business was quite independent of that. Money was the material he dealt in—his stock-in-trade. He understood the Funds as a doctor understands a patient whose pulse he feels every day. He could divine when they were going to rise and when they were going to fall. And there

were other ways in which his knowledge told still more wonderfully. He knew when a new invention, a new manufacture, was going to be popular, by some extraordinary magic which Drummond could not understand. He would catch a speculation of this sort at its tide, and take his profit from it, and bound off again uninjured before the current began to fall. In all these matters he was knowing beyond most men; and he lent to his cousin's husband all the benefit of his experience. For several years Drummond went on adding to his store in a manner so simple and delightful, that his old way of making money, the mode by which months of labour went to the acquisition of a few hundred pounds, looked almost laughable to him. He continued it because he was fond of his art, and loved her for herself alone; but he did it with a sort of banter, smiling at the folly of it, as an enlightened old lady might look at her spinning-wheel. The use of it? Well, as for that, the new ways of spinning were better and cheaper; but still not for the use, but for the pleasure of it!—So Drummond clung to his profession, and worked almost as hard at it as ever. And in the additional ease of his circumstances, not needing to hurry anything for an exhibition, or sacrifice any part of his design for the fancy of a buyer, he certainly painted better than usual, and was made an Associate, to the general satisfaction of his brethren. These were the happy days in which the studio was built. It was connected with the house, as I have said, by a conservatory, a warm, glass-covered, fragrant, balmy place, bright with flowers. 'There must always be violets, and there must always be colour!' he had said to the nurseryman who supplied and kept his fairy palace in order, after the fashion of London. And if ever there was a flowery way contrived into the thorny haunts of art it was this. It would perhaps be rash to say that this was the happy time of Drummond's married life, for they had always been happy, with only that one drawback

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