

# **AT HIS GATES.**

**A Novel.**

**VOL. II.**

**BY MRS OLIPHANT**

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**AT HIS GATES.**

## CHAPTER I.

Helen had still another incident before her, however, ere she left St Mary's Road. It was late in the afternoon when she went back. To go back at all, to enter the dismantled place, and have that new dreary picture thrust into her mind instead of the old image of home, was painful enough, and Norah's cheeks were pale, and even to Helen the air and the movement conveyed a certain relief. They went into the quieter part of the park and walked for an hour or two saying little. Now and then poor Norah would be beguiled into a little monologue, to which her mother lent a half attention—but that was all. It was easier to be in motion than to keep still, and it was less miserable to look at the trees, the turf, the blue sky, than at the walls of a room which was full of associations of happiness. They did not get home until the carriages were beginning to roll into the park for the final round before dinner. And when they reached their own house, there stood a smart cabriolet before it, the horse held by a little tiger. Within the gate two gentlemen met them coming down the steps. One of them was a youth of eighteen or nineteen, who looked at Helen with a wondering awe-stricken glance. The other was—Mr Golden. Norah had closed the garden door heedlessly after her. They were thus shut in, the four together confronting each other, unable to escape. Helen could not believe her eyes. Her heart began to beat, her pale cheeks to flush, a kind of mist of excitement came before her vision. Mr Golden, too, was not without a certain perturbation. He had not expected to see any one. He took off his hat, and cleared his voice, and made an effort to seem at his ease.

'I had just called,' he said, 'to express—to inquire—I did not know things had been so far advanced. I would not intrude—for the world.'

'Oh!' cried Helen, facing him, standing between him and the door, 'how dare you come here?'

'Dare, Mrs Drummond? I—I don't understand——'

'You do understand,' she said, 'better—far better than any one else does. And how dare you come to look at your handiwork? A man may be what you are, and yet have a little shame. Oh, you robber of the dead! if I had been anything but a woman, you would not have ventured to look me in the face.'

He did not venture to look her in the face then; he looked at his companion instead, opening his eyes, and nodding his head slightly, as if to imply that she was crazed. 'It is only a woman who can insult a man with impunity,' he said, 'but I hope I am able to make allowance for your excited feelings. It is natural for a lady to blame some one, I suppose. Rivers, let us go.'

'Not till I have spoken,' she cried in her excitement. 'This is but a boy, and he ought to know whom he is with. Oh, how is it that I cannot strike you down and trample upon you? If I were to call that policeman he would not take you, I suppose. You liar and thief! don't dare to answer me. What, at my own door; at the door of the man whose good name you have stolen, whom you have slandered in his grave—oh my God! who has not even a grave because you drove him mad!—' she cried, her eyes blazing, her cheeks glowing, all the silent beauty of her face growing splendid in her passion.

The young man gazed at her as at an apparition, his lips falling apart, his face paling. He had never heard such a voice, never seen such an outburst of outraged human feeling before.

'Mrs Drummond, this is madness. I—I can make allowance for— for excitement——'

'Be silent, sir,' cried Helen, in her fury. 'Who do you suppose cares what you think? And how dare you open your mouth before me? It is I who have a right to speak. And I wish there were a hundred to hear instead of one. This man had absconded till he heard my husband was dead. Then he came back and assumed innocence, and laid the blame on him who—could not reply. I don't know who you are; but you are young, and you should have a heart. There is not a liar in England—not a thing so vile as this man. He has plundered the dead of his good name. Now go, sir. I have said what I had to say.'

'Mrs Drummond, sometime you will have to answer—sometime you will repent of this,' cried Golden, losing his presence of mind.

'I shall never repent it, not if you could kill me for it,' cried Helen. 'Go; you make the place you stand on vile. Take him away from my sight. I have said what I had to say.'

Mr Golden made an effort to recover himself. He struck his young companion on the shoulder with an attempt at jocularity.

'Come, Rivers,' he said, 'come along, we are dismissed. Don't you see we are no longer wanted here?'

But the lad did not answer the appeal. He stayed behind with his eyes still fixed upon Helen.

'Please, don't blame me,' he said. 'Tell me if I can do anything. I— did not know——'

'Thank you,' she said faintly. Her excitement had failed her all at once. She had put her arms round Norah, and was leaning upon her, haggard and pale as if she were dying. 'Thank you,' she repeated, with a motion of her hand towards the door.

The youth stole out with a sore heart. He stood for a moment irresolute on the pavement. The cab was his and not Golden's; but that personage had got into it, and was calling to him to follow.

'Thanks,' said young Rivers, with the impetuosity of his years. 'I shall not trouble you. Go on pray. I prefer to walk.'

And he turned upon his heel, and went rapidly away. He was gone before the other could realise it; and it was with feelings that it would be impossible to describe, with a consciousness that seemed both bodily and mental of having been beaten and wounded all over, with a singing in his ears, and a bewildered sense of punishment, that Golden picked up the reins and drove away. It was only a few sharp words from a woman's tongue, a thing which a man must steel himself to bear when his operations are of a kind which involve the ruin of families. But Helen had given her blow far more skilfully, far more effectively, than she was aware of. She had clutched at her first chance of striking, without any calculation of results; and the youth she had appealed to in her excitement might have been any nameless lad for what she knew. It was Mr Golden's hard fate that he was not a nameless lad. He was Cyril Rivers, Lord Rivers's eldest son. The manager drove on a little way, slowly, and in great perturbation. And then he drew up the horse, and sprang to the ground.

'You had better go home,' he said to the little groom.

And then, still with that sense of bodily suffering as well as mental, he made his way through Kensington Gardens to the drive. He was a man of fashion, too, as well as a man of business—if he ever could hold up his head again.

Of course he did hold up his head, and in an hour after was ready to have made very good fun of the 'scolding' he had received, and the impression it had made on his young companion.

'I don't wonder,' he said; 'though her rage was all against me, I could not help admiring her. You never can tell what a woman is till you see her in a passion. She was splendid. Her friends ought to advise her to go on the stage.'

'Why should she go on the stage?' said some one standing by.

'Because she is left a beggar. She has not a penny, I suppose.'

'It is lucky that you have suffered so little when so many people are beggared, Golden,' said one of his fine friends.

This little winged shaft went right into the wound made by Helen's fiery lance, and so far as sensation went (which was nothing) Mr Golden had not a happy time that night.

As for Helen, she went in, prostrated by her own vehemence, and threw herself down on her bed, and hid her face from the light. After the first excitement was over shame seized upon her. She had descended from her proper place. She had flown into this outburst of passion and rage before her child. She had lowered herself in Norah's eyes, as she thought—though the child would not take her arm from her neck, nor her lips from her cheek, but clung to her

sobbing, 'Oh, poor mamma! poor mamma!' with sympathetic passion. All this fiery storm through which she had passed had developed Norah. She had gained three or four years in a day. At one bound, from the child who was a piece of still life in the family, deeply beloved, but not needed, by the two who were each other's companions, she had become, all at once, her mother's only stay, her partizan, her supporter, her comrade-in-arms. It is impossible to over-estimate the difference this makes in a child's, and especially in a girl's, life. It made of her an independent, thinking, acting creature, all in a moment. For years everything had been said before her, under the supposition that Norah, absorbed in her book, heard nothing. But she had heard a thousand things. She knew all now without any need of explanation, as well as so young a mind could understand. And she began to grope in her mind towards further knowledge, to put things together which even her mother had not thought of.

'Do you know who the boy was, mamma?' she whispered, after she had sat a long time on the bed, silently consoling the sufferer. 'Oh, I am so glad you spoke, he will never forget it. Now one more knows it besides you and me.'

'There are others who know, dear,' said Helen, who had still poor Stephen's magazine in her hand.

'Yes,' said Norah, 'Dr Maurice and the people who wrote to the papers; but, mamma, nobody like you and me. Whatever they say we know. I am little, and I suppose I shall always be little; but that does not matter. I shall soon be grown up, and able to help. And, mamma, this shall be my work as well as yours—I shall never stop till it is done—never, all my life!'

'Oh, my darling!' cried Helen, clasping her child in her arms. It was not that she received the vow as the child meant it, or even desired that in Norah's opening life there should be nothing of more importance than this early self-devotion; but the sympathy was sweet to her beyond describing, the more that the little creature, who had played and chattered by her side, had suddenly become her friend. In the midst of her sorrow and pain, and even of the prostration and sensitive visionary shame with which this encounter had filled her, she had one sudden throb of pleasure. She was not alone any more.

It was Helen who fell asleep that evening worn out with emotion, and weariness, and suffering. And then Norah rose up softly, and made a pilgrimage by herself all over the deserted house. She went through the conservatory, where, of all the beautiful things poor Robert had loved to see, there remained nothing but the moonlight which filled its emptiness; and into the studio, where she sat down on the floor beside the easel, and clasped her arms round it and cried. She was beginning to weary of the atmosphere of grief, beginning to long for life and sunshine, but yet she clung to the easel and indulged in one childish passion of sobs and tears. 'Oh, papa!' That was all Norah said to herself. But the recollection of all he had been, and of all that had been done to him, surged over the child, and filled her with that sense of the intolerable which afflicts the weak. She could not bear it, yet she had to bear it; just as her mother, just as poor Haldane had to bear—struggling vainly against a power greater than theirs, acquiescing when life and strength ran low, sometimes for a moment divinely consenting, accepting the will of God. But it is seldom that even the experienced soul gets so far as that.

Next morning Mrs Drummond and her daughter went to Dura. Their arrival at the station was very different from that of Mr Burton. No eager porters rushed at them as they stepped out of the railway carriage; the station-master moved to the other side; they landed, and were left on the platform by themselves to count their boxes while the train swept on. It was the first time it had ever happened so to Helen. Her husband had always either been with her, or waiting for her, wherever she travelled. And she was weary with yesterday's agitation, and with all that had so lately happened. Norah came forward and took everything in hand. It was she who spoke to the porter, and set the procession in order.

'Cab? Bless you, miss! there ain't but one in the place, and it's gone on a 'xursion,' he said, 'but I'll get a wheelbarrow and take 'em down. It ain't more than ten minutes' walk.'

'I know the way,' said Helen; and she took her child's hand and walked on into the familiar place. She had not been there since her marriage; but oh! how well she knew it! She put her crape veil over her face to hide her from curious eyes; and it threw a black mist at the same time over the cheerful village. It seemed to Helen as if she was walking in a dream. She knew everything, every stone on the road, the names above the shops, the forms of the trees. There was one great elm, lopsided, which had lost a huge branch (how well she remembered!) by a thunderstorm when she was a child; was it all a dream? Everything looked like a dream except Norah; but Norah was real. As for the child, there was in her heart a lively thrill of pleasure at sight of all this novelty which she could not quite subdue. She had no veil of crape over her eyes, and the red houses all lichened over, the glimpses of fields and trees, the rural aspect of the road, the vision of the common in the distance, all filled her with a suppressed delight. It was wrong,

Norah knew; she called herself back now and then and sighed, and asked herself how she could be so devoid of feeling; but yet the reaction would come. She began to talk in spite of herself.

'I think some one might have come to meet us at the station,' she said. 'Ned might have come. He is a boy, and can go anywhere. I am sure, mamma, *we* would have gone to make them feel a little at home. Where is the Gatehouse? What is that place over there? Why there are shops—a draper's and a confectioner's—and a library! I am very glad there is a library. Mamma, I think I shall like it; is that the common far away yonder? Do you remember any of the people? I should like to know some girls if you will let me. There is little Clara, of course, who is my cousin. Do you think we shall live here always, mamma?'

Norah did not ask nor, indeed, look for any answer to this string of questions. She made a momentary pause of courtesy to leave room for a reply, should any come; but Helen's thoughts were full of the past, and as she made no answer Norah resumed the strain.

'It looks very cheerful here, mamma; though it is a village, it does not look dull. I like the red tiles on the cottages and all this red-brick; perhaps it is a little hot-looking now, but in winter it will be so comfortable. Shall we be able to get our things here without going to town? That seems quite a good shop. I wonder what Mrs Burton and Clara do? But then they are so rich, and we are—poor. Shall I be able to have any lessons, mamma? Can I go on with my music? I wonder if Clara has a governess. She will think it very strange that you should teach me. But I am very glad; I like you better than twenty governesses. Mamma, will it make any difference between Clara and me, them being so rich and us so poor?'

'Oh, Norah, I cannot tell you. Don't ask so many questions,' said Helen.

Norah was wounded; she did not give up her mother's hand, but she loosed her hold of it to show her feelings. She had been very sympathetic, very quiet, and respectful of the grief which in its intensity was beyond her; and now she seemed to herself to have a right to a little sympathy in return. She could understand but dimly what was in her mother's mind; she did not know the associations of which Dura was full; and it was hard to be thus stopped short in that spring of renovating life. As she resigned herself to silence, a feeling of injury came over her; and here, just before her eyes, suddenly appeared a picture of life so different from hers. She saw a band of children gathered about the gate of a house, which stood at a short distance from the road, surrounded by shrubberies and distinguished by one great splendid cedar which stretched its glorious branches over the high garden wall behind, and made a point in the landscape. A lady was driving a little pony-carriage through the open gate, while the children stood watching and waving their hands to her. 'Good-bye, mamma,' 'Don't be long,' 'And mind you bring back Clara with you,' they were calling to her. With a wistful sense of envy Norah gazed and wondered who they were, and if she should ever know them. 'Why are people so different?' she asked herself. She had nobody in the world but her mother, lost behind that crape veil, lost in her own thoughts, who told her not to ask questions, while those other little girls had a smiling mamma in a pretty pony-carriage, who was taking one to drive with her, and was to bring Clara back to see them. Which Clara? Was it the Clara who belonged to Norah, her own cousin, to whom she had a better right than any one? Norah's heart sank as she realized this. No doubt Clara must have many friends; she

could not stand in need of Norah as Norah did of her. She would be a stranger, an interloper, a new little girl whom nobody knew, whom nobody perhaps would care to know. Tears came to the child's eyes. She had been a woman last night rising to the height of the tragedy in which her little life was involved; but now Nature had regained its sway, and she was only twelve years old. It was while her mind was occupied with these thoughts that her mother interrupted them, suddenly pressing her hand.

'Norah, this is our house, where we are to live,' said Helen. Her voice faltered, she held the child's hand as if for support. And now they were at their own door.

Norah gazed at it with a certain dismay. She, too, like Mr Haldane, had her theory about a house in the country. It must be like Southlees, she thought, though without the river; or perhaps, as they had grown poor, it might be something a little better than the lodge at Southlees, a little cottage; but she had never dreamed of anything like this tall red-brick house which twinkled at her with all its windows. She was awed and chilled, and a little frightened, as she crossed the road. Susan was standing at the open door parleying with the porter about their boxes, which she declined to admit till 'the family' came. The one fear which possessed Susan's life, the fear of being 'put upon,' was strong in her at this moment. But she set the balance straight for Norah, by making a sudden curtsey, which tempted the child so sorely to laughter, that her eyes began to shine and her heart to rise once more. She ran up the white steps eagerly before her mother. 'Oh, mamma, I am first. I can say welcome to you,' she said.

But the sight of the drawing-room, into which Susan ushered them, solemnly closing the door after them, struck a moment's chill to

Norah's heart. It seemed so strange to be thus shut in, as if it was not their own house but a prison. It was afternoon, and the sunshine had all gone from that side of the road, and the graceful, old-fashioned room looked dim and ghostly to eyes which had just come out of the light. The windows all draped with brown and grey, the old-fashioned slim grand piano in the corner ('I shall have my music,' said Norah), the black japanned screen with its funny little pictures, the high carved mantelpiece with that square mirror which nobody could see into, puzzled the child, at once attracting and repelling her. There was another round, convex mirror like a shield, on the side wall, but even that did not enable Norah to see herself, it only made a little twinkling picture of her in a vast perspective of drawing-room. Helen had seated herself as soon as the door was shut, and there was she, too, in the picture like a lady come to call. What a strange, dim, ghostly place it was! The bumping of the boxes as they went up-stairs was a comfort to Norah. It was a sound of life breaking the terrible silence. She asked herself what would happen when it was over. Should they fall under some charm and sleep there, like the enchanted princess, for a hundred years? And to think that all this was within reach of that lady in the pony-carriage, and of her children who waved their hands to her!—so near, yet in a different world.

'Mayn't we go and see the house, mamma?' Norah whispered, standing close to her mother's side. 'Shouldn't you like to see where we are to sleep? Shouldn't you like to get out of this room? It frightens me so; it feels like a prison. Oh, mamma! perhaps it would not look so strange—and so—dull—and so—funny,' cried Norah, feeling disposed to cry, 'if you would take your bonnet off.'

Just at this moment there was a sound in the road which stirred the whole village into life, and roused Norah. She ran to the window to

see what it was. It was an event which happened every evening, which all the children in Dura ran to see, though they were so familiar with it. It was Mr Burton driving his high-stepping bays home from the station. He had come by the express made on purpose for him and such as him, which arrived half-an-hour later than the train by which the Drummonds had come. Norah climbed up on her knees on a chair to see over the little old-fashioned blinds. There was some one seated by Mr Burton in the dog-cart, some one who looked at the Gatehouse, as Mr Burton did, while they dashed past. At the sight of him Norah started, and from a little fantastical child became a woman all at once again. It was the young man who the day before had been with Mr Golden at St Mary's Road, he who had heard her father's vindication, and had believed it, and 'was on our side,' Norah felt, against all the world.

## CHAPTER II.

There is always a little excitement in a village over a new inhabitant, and the Drummonds were not common strangers to be speculated vaguely about. There were many people in Dura who remembered Helen in her beauty and youth. And next morning, when it became known that she had arrived at the Gatehouse, the whole place burst into gossip on the subject. Even the new people, the City people who lived in the white villas near the station, were moved by it. For poor Drummond's story was known everywhere, and his miserable fate, and the discussion in the newspapers. Even here, in the quietness of the country, people took sides, and public opinion was by no means so unanimous as poor Helen had supposed. The papers had accepted her husband's guilt as certain, but opinion was very much divided on the subject among people who had means of knowing. 'Burton ought to have warned that poor fellow,' one of the City gentlemen said to another at the station, going up by the early train. 'I would not trust a simpleton in the hands of a smart man like Golden.'

'Do you think he was a simpleton?' said the other.

'In business, yes——' said the first speaker.

'How could he be otherwise? But, by Jove, sir, what a splendid painter! I never saw anything I liked better than that picture of his in the last Exhibition. Poor fellow! And to put him in Golden's hands, a man well known to be up to every dodge. I wonder what Burton could be thinking of. I wonder he can look that poor lady in the face.'

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