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# **The Old Stone House and Other Stories**

Anna Katharine Green

# Imprint

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## THE OLD STONE HOUSE.

I

was riding along one autumn day through a certain wooded portion of New York State, when I came suddenly upon an old stone house in which the marks of age were in such startling contrast to its unfinished condition that I involuntarily stopped my horse and took a long survey of the lonesome structure. Embowered in a forest which had so grown in thickness and height since the erection of this building that the boughs of some of the tallest trees almost met across its decayed roof, it presented even at first view an appearance of picturesque solitude almost approaching to desolation. But when my eye had time to note that the moss was clinging to eaves from under which the scaffolding had never been taken, and that of the ten large windows in the blackened front of the house only two had ever been furnished[2] with frames, the awe of some tragic mystery began to creep over me, and I sat and wondered at the sight till my increasing interest compelled me to alight and take a nearer view of the place.

The great front door which had been finished so many years ago, but which had never been hung, leaned against the side of the house, of which it had almost become a part, so long had they clung together amid the drippings of innumerable rains. Close beside it yawned the entrance, a large black gap through which nearly a century of storms had rushed with their winds and wet till the lintels were green with moisture and slippery with rot. Standing on this untrod threshold, I instinctively glanced up at the scaffolding above me, and started as I noticed that it had partially fallen away, as if time were weakening its supports and making the precipitation of the whole a threatening possibility. Alarmed lest it might fall while I stood there, I did not linger long beneath it, but, with a shudder which I afterwards remembered, stepped into the house and proceeded to inspect its rotting, naked, and unfinished walls. I found[3] them all in the one condition. A fine house had once been planned and nearly completed, but it had been abandoned before

the hearths had been tiled, or the wainscoting nailed to its place. The staircase which ran up through the centre of the house was without banisters but otherwise finished and in a state of fair preservation. Seeing this and not being able to resist the temptation which it offered me of inspecting the rest of the house, I ascended to the second story.

Here the doors were hung and the fireplaces bricked, and as I wandered from room to room I wondered more than ever what had caused the desertion of so promising a dwelling. If, as appeared, the first owner had died suddenly, why could not an heir have been found, and what could be the story of a place so abandoned and left to destruction that its walls gave no token of ever having offered shelter to a human being? As I could not answer this question I allowed my imagination full play, and was just forming some weird explanation of the facts before me when I felt my arm suddenly seized from behind, and paused aghast. Was I then[4] not alone in the deserted building? Was there some solitary being who laid claim to its desolation and betrayed jealousy at any intrusion within its mysterious precincts? Or was the dismal place haunted by some uneasy spirit, who with long, uncanny fingers stood ready to clutch the man who presumed to bring living hopes and fears into a spot dedicated entirely to memories? I had scarcely the courage to ask, but when I turned and saw what it was that had alarmed me, I did not know whether to laugh at my fears or feel increased awe of my surroundings. For it was the twigs of a tree which had seized me, and for a long limb such as this to have grown into a place intended for the abode of man, necessitated a lapse of time and a depth of solitude oppressive to think of.

Anxious to be rid of suggestions wellnigh bordering upon the superstitious, I took one peep from the front windows, and then descended to the first floor. The sight of my horse quietly dozing in the summer sunlight had reassured me, and by the time I had recrossed the dismal threshold, and regained[5] the cheerful highway, I was conscious of no emotions deeper than the intense interest of a curious mind to solve the mystery and understand the secret of this remarkable house.



Rousing my horse from his comfortable nap, I rode on through the forest; but scarcely had I gone a dozen rods before the road took a turn, the trees suddenly parted, and I found myself face to face with wide rolling meadows and a busy village. So, then, this ancient and deserted house was not in the heart of the woods, as I had imagined, but in the outskirts of a town, and face to face with life and activity. This discovery was a shock to my romance, but as it gave my curiosity an immediate hope of satisfaction, I soon became reconciled to the situation, and taking the road which led to the village, drew up before the inn and went in, ostensibly for refreshment. This being speedily provided, I sat down in the cosy dining-room, and as soon as opportunity offered, asked the attentive landlady why the old house in the woods had remained so long deserted.

She gave me an odd look, and then glanced aside at an old man who sat doubled up in the[6] opposite corner. "It is a long story," said she, "and I am busy now; but later, if you wish to hear it, I will tell you all we know on the subject. After father is gone out," she whispered. "It always excites him to hear any talk about that old place."

I saw that it did. I had no sooner mentioned the house than his white head lifted itself with something like spirit, and his form, which had seemed a moment before so bent and aged, straightened with an interest that made him look almost hale again.

"I will tell you," he broke in; "I am not busy. I was ninety last birthday, and I forget sometimes my grandchildren's names, but I never forget what took place in that old house one night fifty years ago—never, never."

"I know, I know," hastily interposed his daughter, "you remember beautifully; but this gentleman wishes to eat his dinner now, and must not have his appetite interfered with. You will wait, will you not, sir, till I have a little more leisure?"

What could I answer but Yes, and what could the poor old man do but shrink back[7] into his corner, disappointed and abashed. Yet I was not satisfied, nor was he, as I could see by the appealing glances he gave me now and then from under the fallen masses of his long white hair. But the landlady was complaisant and moved about the table and in and out of the room with a bustling air that

left us but little opportunity for conversation. At length she was absent somewhat longer than usual, whereupon the old man, suddenly lifting his head, cried out:

"*She* cannot tell the story. She has no feeling for it; she wasn't *there*."

"And you were," I ventured.

"Yes, yes, I was there, always there; and I see it all now," he murmured. "Fifty years ago, and I see it all as if it were happening at this moment before my eyes. But she will not let me talk about it," he complained, as the sound of her footsteps was heard again on the kitchen boards. "Though it makes me young again, she always stops me just as if I were a child. But she cannot help my showing you —"

Here her steps became audible in the hall, and his words died away on his lips. By the[8] time she had entered, he was seated with his head half turned aside, and his form bent over as if he were in spirit a thousand miles from the spot.

Amused at his cunning, and interested in spite of myself at the childish eagerness he displayed to tell his tale, I waited with a secret impatience almost as great as his own perhaps, for her to leave the room again, and thus give him the opportunity of finishing his sentence. At last there came an imperative call for her presence without, and she hurried away. She was no sooner gone than the old man exclaimed:

"I have it all written down. I wrote it years and years ago, at the very time it happened. She cannot keep me from showing you that; no, no, she cannot keep me from showing you that." And rising to his feet with a difficulty that for the first time revealed to me the full extent of his infirmity, he hobbled slowly across the floor to the open door, through which he passed with many cunning winks and nods.

"It grows quite exciting," thought I, and half feared his daughter would not allow him to return. But either she was too much engrossed[9] to heed him, or had been too much deceived by his seeming indifference when she last entered the room, to suspect the errand which had taken him out of it. For sooner than I had expected, and quite some few minutes before she came back herself,

he shuffled in again, carrying under his coat a roll of yellow paper, which he thrust into my hand with a gratified leer, saying:

"There it is. I was a gay young lad in those days, and could go and come with the best. Read it, sir, read it; and if Maria says anything against it, tell her it was written long before she was born and when I was as pert as she is now, and a good deal more observing."

Chuckling with satisfaction, he turned away, and had barely disappeared in the hall when she came in and saw me with the roll in my hand.

"Well! I declare!" she exclaimed; "and has he been bringing you that? What ever shall I do with him and his everlasting manuscript? You will pardon him, sir; he is ninety and upwards, and thinks everybody is as interested in the story of that old house as he is himself." [10]

"And I, for one, am," was my hasty reply. "If the writing is at all legible, I am anxious to read it. You won't object, will you?"

"Oh, no," was her good-humored rejoinder. "I won't object; I only hate to have father's mind roused on this subject, because he is sure to be sick after it. But now that you have the story, read it; whether you will think as he did, on a certain point, is another question. I don't; but then father always said I would never believe ill of anybody."

Her smile certainly bore out her words, it was so good-tempered and confiding; and pleased with her manner in spite of myself, I accepted her invitation to make use of her own little parlor, and sat down in the glow of a brilliant autumn afternoon to read this old-time history.

Will Juliet be at home to-day? She must know that I am coming. When I met her this morning, tripping back from the farm, I gave her a look which, if she cares anything about me, must have told her that I would be among the lads who would be sure to pay her their respects at early candle-light. For I cannot [11] resist her saucy pout and dancing dimples any longer. Though I am barely twenty, I am a man, and one who is quite forehanded and able to take unto himself a wife. Ralph Urphistone has both wife and babe, and he was only twenty-one last August. Why, then, should I not go courting, when

the prettiest maid that has graced the town for many a year holds out the guerdon of her smiles to all who will vie for them?

To be sure, the fact that she has more than one wooer already may be considered detrimental to my success. But love is fed by rivalry, and if Colonel Schuyler does not pay her his addresses, I think my chances may be considered as good as any one's. For am I not the tallest and most straightly built man in town, and have I not a little cottage all my own, with the neatest of gardens behind it, and an apple-tree in front whose blossoms hang ready to shower themselves like rain upon the head of her who will enter there as a bride? It is not yet dark, but I will forestall the sunset by a half hour and begin my visit now. If I am first at her gate, Lemuel Phillips may look less arrogant[12] when he comes to ask her company to the next singing school.

I was not first at her gate; two others were there before me. Ah, she is prettier than ever I supposed, and chirper than the sparrow which builds every year a nest in my old apple-tree. When she saw me come up the walk, her cheeks turned pink, but I do not know if it was from pleasure or annoyance, for she gave nothing but vexing replies to every compliment I paid her. But then Lemuel Phillips fared no better; and she was so bitter-sweet to Orrin Day that he left in a huff and vowed he would never step across her threshold again. I thought she was a trifle more serious after he had gone, but when a woman's eyes are as bright as hers, and the frowns and smiles with which she disports herself chase each other so rapidly over a face both mischievous and charming, a man's judgment goes astray, and he scarcely knows reality from seeming. But true or false, she is pretty as a harebell and bright as glinting sunshine; and I mean to marry her, if only Colonel Schuyler will hold himself aloof.[13]

Colonel Schuyler may hold himself aloof, but he is a man like the rest of us for all that. Yesterday as I was sauntering in the churchyard waiting for the appearance of a certain white-robed figure crowned by the demurest of little hats, I caught a glimpse of his face as he leaned on one of the tombstones near Patience Goodyear's grave, and I saw that he was waiting also for the same white figure and the same demure hat. This gave me a shock; for though I had

never really dared to hope he would remain unmoved by a loveliness so rare in our village, and indeed, as I take it, in any village, I did not think he would show so much impatience, or await her appearance with such burning and uncontrollable ardor.

Indeed I was so affected by his look that I forgot to watch any longer for her coming, but kept my gaze fixed on his countenance, till I saw by the change which rapidly took place in it that she had stepped out of the great church door and was now standing before us, making the sunshine more brilliant by her smiles, and the spring the sweeter for her presence.[14]

Then I came to myself and rushed forward with the rest of the lads. Did he follow behind us? I do not think so, for the rosy lips which had smiled upon us with so airy a welcome soon showed a discontented curve not to be belied by the merry words that issued from them, and when we would have escorted her across the fields to her father's house, she made a mocking curtsy, and wandered away with the ugliest old crone who mouths and mumbles in the meeting-house. Did she do this to mock us or him? If to mock him he had best take care, for beauty scorned is apt to grow dangerous. But perhaps it was to mock us? Well, well, there would be nothing new in that; she is ever mocking us.

They say the Colonel passes her gate a dozen times a day, but never goes in and never looks up. Is he indifferent then? I cannot think so. Perhaps he fears her caprices and disapproves of her coquetry. If that is so, she shall be my wife before he wakens to the knowledge that her coquetry hides a passionate and loving heart.[15]

Colonel Schuyler is a dark man. He has eyes which pierce you, and a smile which, if it could be understood, might perhaps be less fascinating than it is. If she has noticed his watching her, the little heart that flutters in her breast must have beaten faster by many a throb. For he is the one great man within twenty miles, and so handsome and above us all that I do not know of a woman but Juliet whose voice does not sink a tone lower whenever she speaks of him. But he is a proud man, and seems to take no notice of any one. Indeed he scarcely appears to live in our world. Will he come down

from his high estate at the beck of this village beauty? Many say not, but I say yes; with those eyes of his he cannot help it.

Juliet is more capricious than ever. Lemuel Phillips for one is tired of it, and imitating Orrin Day, bade her a good-even to-night which I am sure he does not intend to follow with a blithe good-morrow.

I might do the same if her pleading eyes would let me. But she seems to cling to me[16] even when she is most provokingly saucy; and though I cannot see any love in her manner, there is something in it very different from hate; and this it is which holds me. Can a woman be too pretty for her own happiness, and are many lovers a weariness to the heart?

Juliet is positively unhappy. To-day when she laughed the gayest it was to hide her tears, and no one, not even a thoroughly spoiled beauty, could be as wayward as she if there were not some bitter arrow rankling in her heart. She was riding down the street on a pillion behind her father, and Colonel Schuyler, who had been leaning on the gate in front of his house, turned his back upon her and went inside when he saw her coming. Was this what made her so white and reckless when she came up to where I was standing with Orrin Day, and was it her chagrin at the great man's apparent indifference which gave that sharp edge to the good-morning with which she rode haughtily away? If it was I can forgive you, my lady-bird, for there is reason for your folly if I am any judge of my fellow-men. Colonel[17] Schuyler is not indifferent but circumspect, and circumspection in a lover is an insult to his lady's charms.

She knows now what I knew a week ago. Colonel Schuyler is in love with her and will marry her if she does not play the coquette with him. He has been to her house and her father already holds his head higher as he paces up and down the street. I am left in the lurch, and if I had not foreseen this end to my hopes, might have been a very miserable man to-night. For I was near obtaining the object of my heart, as I know from her own lips, though the words were not intended for my ears. You see I was the one who surprised him talking with her in the garden. I had been walking around the place on the outer side of the wall as I often did from pure love for her, and not knowing she was on the other side was very much

startled when I heard her voice speaking my name; so much startled that I stood still in my astonishment and thus heard her say:

"Philo Adams has a little cottage all his own and I can be mistress of it any day,—or so[18] he tells me. I had rather go into that little cottage where every board I trod on would be my own, than live in the grandest room you could give me in a house of which I would not be the mistress."

"But if I make a home for you," he pleaded, "grand as my father's, but built entirely for you —"

"Ah!" was her soft reply, "that might make me listen to you, for I should then think you loved me."

The wall was between us, but I could see her face as she said this as plainly as if I had been the fortunate man at her side. And I could see his face too, though it was only in fancy I had ever beheld it soften as I knew it must be softening now. Silence such as followed her words is eloquent, and I feared my own passions too much to linger till it should be again broken by vows I had not the courage to hear. So I crept away conscious of but one thing, which was that my dream was ended, and that my brave apple-tree would never shower its bridal blossoms upon the head I love, for whatever threshold she crosses as mistress it will not[19] now be that of the little cottage every board of which might have been her own.

If I had doubted the result of the Colonel's offer to Juliet, the news which came to me this morning would have convinced me that all was well with them and that their marriage was simply a matter of time. Ground has been broken in the pleasant opening on the verge of the forest, and carts and men hired to bring stone for the fine new dwelling Colonel Schuyler proposes to rear for himself. The whole town is agog, but I keep the secret I surprised, and only Juliet knows that I am no longer deceived as to her feelings, for I did not go to see her to-night for the first time since I made up mind that I would have her for my wife. I am glad I restrained myself, for Orrin Day, who had kept his word valiantly up to this very day, came riding by my house furiously a half hour ago, and seeing me, called out:

"Why didn't you tell me she had a new adorer? I went there to-night and Colonel Schuyler sat at her side as you and I never[20] sat yet, and — and —" he stammered frantically, "*I did not kill him.*"

"You — Come back!" I shouted, for he was flying by like the wind. But he did not heed me nor stop, but vanished in the thick darkness, while the lessening sound of his horse's hoofs rang dismally back from the growing distance.

So this man has loved her passionately too, and the house which is destined to rise in the woods will throw a shadow over more than one hearthstone in this quiet village. I declare I am sorry that Orrin has taken it so much to heart, for he has a proud and determined spirit, and will not forget his wrongs as soon as it would be wise for him to do. Poor, poor Juliet, are you making enemies against your bridal day? If so, it behooves me at least to remain your friend.

I saw Orrin again to-day, and he looks like one haunted. He was riding as usual, and his cloak flew out behind him as he sped down the street and away into the woods. I wonder if she too saw him, from behind her lattice. I[21] thought I detected the curtain move as he thundered by her gate, but I am so filled with thoughts of her just now that I cannot always trust my judgment. I am, however, sure of one thing, and that is that if Colonel Schuyler and Orrin meet, there will be trouble.

I never thought Orrin handsome till to-day. He is fair, and I like dark men; and he is small, and I admire men of stature. But when I came upon him this morning, talking and laughing among a group of lads like ourselves, I could not but see that his blue eye shone with a fire that made it as brilliant as any dark one could be, and that in his manner, verging as it did upon the reckless, there was a spirit and force which made him look both dangerous and fascinating. He was haranguing them on a question of the day, but when he saw me he stepped out of the crowd, and, beckoning me to follow him, led the way to a retired spot, where, the instant we were free from watching eyes, he turned and said: "You liked her too, Philo Adams. I should have been willing if you —" Here he choked and paused. I had never seen a face so full of[22] fiery emotions. "No, no, no," he went on, after a moment of silent struggle; "I could not have borne it to see any man take away what was so precious to me.



"I—I—I did not know I cared for her so much," he now explained, observing my look of surprise. "She teased me and put me off, and coquetted with you and Lemuel and whoever else happened to be at her side till I grew beside myself and left her, as I thought, forever. But there are women you can leave and women you cannot, and when I found she teased and fretted me more at a distance than when she was under my very eye, I went back only to find—Philo, do you think he will marry her?"

I choked down my own emotions and solemnly answered: "Yes, he is building her a home. You must have seen the stones that are being piled up yonder on the verge of the forest."

He turned, glared at me, made a peculiar sound with his lips, and then stood silent, opening and closing his hands in a way that made my blood run chill in spite of myself.

"A house!" he murmured, at last; "I wish I had the building of that house!"[23]

The tone, the look he gave, alarmed me still further.

"You would build it well!" I cried. It was his trade, the building of houses.

"I would build it slowly," was his ominous answer.

Juliet certainly likes me, and trusts me, I think, more than any other of the young men who used to go a-courting her. I have seen it for some time in the looks she has now and then given me across the meeting-house during the long sermon on Sunday mornings, but to-day I am sure of it. For she has spoken to me, and asked me—But let me tell you how it was: We were all standing under Ralph Urphistone's big tree, looking at his little one toddling over the grass after a ball one of the lads had thrown after her, when I felt the slightest touch on my arm, and, glancing round, saw Juliet.

She was standing beside her father, and if ever she looked pretty it was just then, for the day was warm and she had taken off her great hat so that the curls flew freely around her face that was dimpled and flushed with some feeling[24] which did not allow her to lift her eyes. Had she touched me? I thought so, and yet I did not dare to take it for granted, for Colonel Schuyler was standing on the

edge of the crowd, frowning in some displeasure at the bare head of his provoking little betrothed, and when Colonel Schuyler frowns there is no man of us but Orrin who would dare approach the object of his preference, much less address her, except in the coldest courtesy.

But I was sure she had something to say to me, so I lingered under the tree till the crowd had all dispersed and Colonel Schuyler, drawn away by her father, had left us for a moment face to face. Then I saw I was right.

"Philo," she murmured, and oh, how her face changed! "you are my friend, I know you are my friend, because you alone out of them all have never given me sharp words; will you, will you do something for me which will make me less miserable, something which may prevent wrong and trouble, and keep Orrin—"

Orrin? did she call him Orrin?

"Oh," she cried, "you have no sympathy. You — "[25]

"Hush!" I entreated. "You have not treated me well, but I am always your friend. What do you want me to do?"

She trembled, glanced around her in the pleasant sunshine, and then up into my face.

"I want you," she murmured, "to keep Orrin and Colonel Schuyler apart. You are Orrin's friend; stay with him, keep by him, do not let him run alone upon his enemy, for—for there is danger in their meeting—and—and—"

She could not say more, for just then her father and the Colonel came back, and she had barely time to call up her dimples and toss her head in merry banter before they were at her side.

As for myself, I stood dazed and confused, feeling that my six feet made me too conspicuous, and longing in a vague and futile way to let her know without words that I would do what she asked.

And I think I did accomplish it, though I said nothing to her and but little to her companions. For when we parted I took the street which leads directly to Orrin's house; and when Colonel Schuyler queried in his soft[26] and gentlemanlike way why I left them so soon, I managed to reply:

"My road lies here"; and so left them.

I have not told Orrin what she said, but I am rarely away from his vicinity now, during those hours when he is free to come and go about the village. I think he wonders at my persistent friendship, sometimes, but he says nothing, and is not even disagreeable to—*me*. So I share his pleasures, if they are pleasures, expecting every day to see him run across the Colonel in the tavern or on the green; but he never does, perhaps because the Colonel is always with her now, and we are not nor are ever likely to be again.

Do I understand her, or do I understand Orrin, or do I even understand myself? No, but I understand my duty, and that is enough, though it is sometimes hard to do it, and I would rather be where I could forget, instead of being where I am forced continually to remember.

Am I always with Orrin when he is not at work or asleep? I begin to doubt it. There[27] are times when there is such a change in him that I feel sure he has been near her, or at least seen her, but where or how, I do not know and cannot even suspect. He never speaks of her, not now, but he watches the house slowly rising in the forest, as if he would lay a spell upon it. Not that he visits it by daylight, or mingles with the men who are busy laying stone upon stone; no, no, he goes to it at night, goes when the moon and stars alone shed light upon its growing proportions; and standing before it, seems to count each stone which has been added through the day, as if he were reckoning up the months yet remaining to him of life and happiness.

I never speak to him during these expeditions. I go with him because he does not forbid me to do so, but we never exchange a word till we have left the forest behind us and stand again within the village streets. If I did speak I might learn something of what is going on in his bitter and burning heart, but I never have the courage to do so, perhaps because I had rather not know what he plans or purposes.[28]

She is not as daintily rounded as she was once. Her cheek is thinner, and there is a tremulous move to her lip I never saw in it in the old coquettish days. Is she not happy in her betrothal, or are her fears of Orrin greater than her confidence in me? It must be the

latter, for Colonel Schuyler is a lover in a thousand, and scarcely a day passes without some new evidence of his passionate devotion. She ought to be happy, if she is not, and I am sure there is not another woman in town but would feel herself the most favored of her sex if she had the half of Juliet's prospects before her. But Juliet was ever wayward; and simply because she ought to increase in beauty and joy, she pales and pines and gets delicate, and makes the hearts of her lovers grow mad with fear and longing.

Where have I been? What have I seen, and what do the events of this night portend? As Orrin and myself were returning from our usual visit to the house in the woods—it is well up now, and its huge empty square looms weirdly enough in the moonlighted forest,—we came[29] out upon the churchyard in front of the meeting-house, and Orrin said:

"You may come with me or not, I do not care; but I am going in amongst these graves. I feel like holding companionship with dead people to-night."

"Then so do I," said I, for I was not deceived by his words. It was not to hold companionship with the dead, but with the living, that he chose to linger there. The churchyard is in a direct line with her house, and, sitting on the meeting-house steps one can get a very good view of the windows of her room.

"Very well," he sighed, and disdained to say more.

As for myself, I felt too keenly the weirdness of the whole situation to do more than lean my back against a tree and wait till his fancy wearied of the moonlight and silence. The stones about us, glooming darkly through the night, were not the most cheerful of companions, and when you add to this the sighing of the willows and the flickering shadows which rose and fell over the face of the meeting-house as the branches moved in the wind, you can understand why[30] I rather regretted the hitherto gloomy enough hour we were accustomed to spend in the forest.

But Orrin seemed to regret nothing. He had seated himself where I knew he would, on the steps of the meeting-house, and was gazing, with chin sunk in his two hands, down the street where Juliet dwelt. I do not think he expected anything to happen; I think he