

**THE HOUSE ON THE
MARSH: A
ROMANCE**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649607631

The House on the Marsh: A Romance by Florence Warden

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

www.triestepublishing.com

FLORENCE WARDEN

**THE HOUSE ON THE
MARSH: A
ROMANCE**

THE
HOUSE ON THE MARSH.

A ROMANCE.



NEW YORK:
D. APPLETON AND COMPANY,
1, 3, AND 5 BOND STREET.
1884.

THE HOUSE ON THE MARSH.

CHAPTER I.

"WANTED, a Governess; must be young." I cut out the advertisement thus headed eagerly from the *Times*. I was eighteen, and my youth had been the great obstacle to my getting an engagement; now here was some delightful advertiser who considered it an advantage. I wrote to the address given, enclosing my photograph and the list of my qualifications. Within a week I was travelling down to Geldham, Norfolk, engaged to teach "one little girl, aged six," at a salary of thirty-five pounds a year. The correspondence had been carried on by my future pupil's father, who said he would meet me at the station at Beaconsburgh, the market-town nearest to Geldham.

It was about five o'clock on an afternoon in early August that I sat, trembling with excitement and fright, at the window of the railway-carriage, as the train steamed slowly into Beaconsburgh station. I looked out on to the platform. There were very few people on it, and there was no one who appeared at all like the gentleman I had pictured to myself as my future employer. There were two or three red-faced men who gave one the impression of being farmers, and at one end there were two young men engaged in securing a large mastiff, which was bounding about in great excitement at sight of the train. I got out and spoke to the station-master.

"There is Mr. Rayner himself, ma'am," said he, pointing towards the two young men with the dog.

One of them was now looking about, as if in search of somebody; and I walked timidly towards him. He seemed puzzled as his eyes fell upon me; then suddenly he raised his hat.

"Miss Christie?" he said interrogatively, growing very red.

"Yes," said I, bowing and blushing too.

"Will you come and show me which is your luggage?"

I was surprised and rather confused to find Mr. Rayner so much

younger and less self-possessed than I had expected. I followed him and pointed out my boxes.

"The dog-cart is waiting outside," said he; "let me carry your bag."

I followed him through the station. Three or four big dogs began jumping up upon him and upon me as we came out.

"Down, Rover! Down, Luke! Get down, Tray!" said he, raising his voice.

I had noticed what a very pleasant rich voice he had when he first spoke to me, and now I remembered how particular he had been in his letters about my music; so I concluded that Mr. Rayner sang. He helped me into the dog-cart, carefully wrapped me up with a rug, and then, instead of getting in himself, patted the neck of the brown mare, who turned her head and put her nose into her master's hand. I was trying to get over my bewilderment. Of course I might have expected that the father of my six-year-old pupil would not be the middle-aged gray-haired man I had pictured to myself; but for him to be a man who did not look more than three or four and twenty was a surprise; and to find him so shy and deferential did not seem quite right, considering our respective positions. He was big and broad, and rather massive, had dark hair and mustache, gray eyes, and a kind simplicity of expression, which perhaps, I thought, with his habit of blushing, made him look younger than he was. He left the mare and stood by me again.

"I am afraid you will find the country dull. You will miss the gayety of London."

"I haven't led a very gay life," said I; "I don't think poor people are very gay anywhere."

"But you have not been shut up in a schoolroom before. I can't think how you will stand it. I always hated schoolrooms; and it's a fact that I was never in a school without being told that I was a disgrace to it."

Mr. Rayner did not seem much distressed as he made this confession.

"I dare say you were great at cricket, or rowing, or—or—fighting," I hazarded, feeling that some rejoinder was expected.

"No, I wasn't. I remember giving a boy a black eye once for calling me a dunce. He was quite right, you know. And I remember being surprised that I hurt him so much; for I generally got the worst of it in a fight. They used to say it took a good deal to rouse me; and I didn't do much harm when I was roused," he added, laughing.

37-14
29

"I hope your daughter does not share her father's dislike of school routine," I broke out anxiously.

He started and looked up at me, coloring vividly, and then said, with some amusement in his tones—

"Did you take me for Mr. Rayner?" The next moment he seemed sorry for my evident confusion, and added, looking away, "My name is Reade. Mrs. Rayner sent her brougham for you; but a wagon ran into it and took one of the wheels off; so I put my cart at your disposal. I hope you don't mind driving in a thing like this?"

"Oh, no!" I said.

"That was Mr. Rayner on the platform with me," he went on. "His dog rushed out just as the train came up, and he asked me to see to your luggage while he held him. I don't know why he is so long."

As he spoke, Mr. Rayner himself came out of the station, letting his mastiff loose at the door. I saw in a moment that he was a few years older than my companion, and that, while they both wore round hats and Norfolk jackets, he bore the impress of town breeding as clearly as Mr. Reade did that of the country. He was slight, well made, with delicate features and a dark golden beard and mustache. He came up, raising his hat, and shook hands with me.

"You have been marvelling at the barbarism of Norfolk-manners, Miss Christie, and asking 'When is the next train back to London?'" But I have been warned by my wife not to make my reappearance at home without a certain parcel from the 'Stores' which has been due at this station about ten days, but has, for some unaccountable reason, failed to turn up hitherto. By the way, I hope my sprightly young friend has been entertaining you well?"

"Miss Christie took me for you, Mr. Rayner," said Mr. Reade, shyly reddening again.

"And has now to suffer the awful disappointment of finding that Mr. Rayner is an old fogey after all. Miss Christie, forgive my gray hairs. You will find me a great deal more trustworthy than any of these gay deceiving Norfolk lads. Now, Laurence, my boy, if you want us to get home before the mist rises, we had better start."

Mr. Rayner sprang up behind; Mr. Reade got up in front by my side, and took the reins; and off we started, with the five dogs bounding, barking, and growling along the road as we went. We had to drive right through Beaconsburgh; up a long hill to the market-place, which was lively and busy, as it was market-day; down another long hill, lined with the dreary old houses of the *slite* of a provincial town; past a tan-yard, over a small bridge crowded with cattle returning

from market, and then along two miles of straight willow-bordered road over a marsh. The scenery was not particularly pretty; but I had never lived in the country, and everything was new and interesting to me. Mr. Rayner was occupied at the back with letters and papers, and Mr. Reade at my side listened to my comments with flattering interest and appreciation.

"How beautifully green everything is!" I remarked presently.

"Yes, rather too green," Mr. Reade rejoined ruefully. "We have had a wet summer, and now we are going to have a wet autumn, I believe, and this place will be nothing but a swamp."

"Don't set Miss Christie against the place, Laurence," said Mr. Rayner rather sharply.

We passed through a low-lying village—some of the houses of which were flooded in winter, Mr. Reade told me—up a hill, down a hill, and up another sloping road, at the side of which stretched the marsh again.

"There is the Alders, Miss Christie," said he, pointing with his whip to a pretty red house, half covered with ivy and surrounded by trees, which stood below the road, on the borders of the marsh.

"Here, Laurence, I'll get down and take the short cut," said Mr. Rayner.

There was a foot-path which led from this point of the road straight to the house through a couple of fields and a plantation. After Mr. Rayner had alighted, Mr. Reade and I drove on by the road.

"What a lovely place!" I cried enthusiastically.

My companion remained silent.

"And, oh, what a beautiful pond! I do believe it has water-lilies!" I exclaimed, turning round half breathless at such a glorious discovery.

"I wouldn't have that stagnant water near my house for my children to play about for something!" said he, in an energetic growl which surprised me.

I said no more until we drove slowly down the sloping carriage-drive through the trees which led to the house; then again my admiration broke out.

"Oh, how delightfully cool it looks, with the ivy all over it to keep out the hot sun!"

"Yes, and to keep in the cold moisture, Miss Christie. That ivy hasn't been cut for the last five years; and it ought to be torn down altogether to make the place fit to live in. It is no better than a pest-house!" he went on, getting more and more excited. "I wouldn't let a laborer live in it!"

"A laborer won't have a chance until my lease is up, Laurence," said Mr. Rayner dryly, coming out of a path among the trees. And the two men exchanged looks which showed that at the bottom of their hearts they were not friends.

But then it was not likely that Mr. Rayner would care to hear his beautiful home called a pest-house!

We drove slowly down to the hall door, which was open, and a gaunt untidy-looking servant came out and carried in my boxes. Mr. Reade helped me down and stood by me, apparently examining the harness, while I looked in an ecstasy of admiration at the dark red house thickly covered with ivy, and at the gray stone portico, the pillars of which were stained with picturesque patches of green, while the capitals were overgrown with soft bronze and brown moss. Then he seized a moment, when Mr. Rayner was speaking to the servant, to stoop and say to me quickly, in a low voice—

"Don't let them put you near Mrs. Rayner's room."

I could not answer, could not ask why, for the next moment he was calling out good-by to Mr. Rayner, and, raising his hat to me, was walking by the side of the dog-cart up the steep drive that led through the garden to the road. I was sorry he was gone. I wanted to ask what he meant by his strange warning, and to thank him for his kindness. A distressing sense of loneliness came over me. Mr. Rayner, who had grown grave and silent and deeply occupied with his letters during the last part of the drive, had gone into the house forgetting to invite me in; the servant had disappeared with my last box. Instead of following her, I stood watching the dog-cart and its owner out of sight, until a harsh woman's voice startled me.

"Won't you come in? I'm to show you to your room."

It was the gaunt servant who addressed me. I turned, blushing, and followed her into a low long hall, dark, cool, and old-fashioned, such as the outside of the house had prepared me for; up an oak-lined staircase; through a few of those short and inconvenient passages which abound in old houses that have been added to from time to time, to a corner-room, shabby, dark, and bare-looking, where my boxes were already installed. I sat down on one of these, the only friendly things I had about me, and began to cry. Somebody might at least have come to the door to meet me! I thought of Mr. Reade's words, and began to wonder with a new sense of dread what Mrs. Rayner was like. Was she an invalid? Was she—mad? If not, why had she left the correspondence about her child's governess entirely to her husband? My tears dried slowly as I went on puzzling myself uselessly about this mystery which must be so very soon

solved; and I was scarcely ready when the servant returned to tell me that tea was waiting for me. But my curiosity was only to be sharpened. Tea was prepared for me alone, the servant saying that Mr. Rayner was busy, and had had his taken into the study. Not a word about Mrs. Rayner—no sign of a pupil! So great were my anxiety and curiosity that I forgot how hungry I was, and in a few minutes I had finished my tea, and was standing by the window looking out into the garden.

It was not yet seven o'clock and a bright summer evening. A light breeze had sprung up and was swaying the tops of the trees that grew thickly round the house. On the side of the dining-room a mossy lawn stretched from the roots of the trees right up to the French windows. I opened one of these and went out. I had never been in such a beautiful garden before. The grass was soft and springy and well kept; there were no stiff beds of geraniums and verbenas, but under the trees and against the house, and wherever there was a spare corner, grew clumps of Scotch and monthly roses, Canterbury bells, prince's feather, and such simple flowers. The house was built on the very border of the marsh, at the bottom of a hill which sloped down, covered with trees, towards the dining-room side of the house. I made my way round to the front and the moss-grown portico—from here one caught glimpses of the marsh through the thick trees. I followed a grass-path cut through them, facing the front of the house, until I came to the pond which had excited my admiration from the dog-cart. Here the vegetation grew unchecked. The water was half covered with smooth green duckweed and water-lilies, and the reeds and rushes, which grew tall and thick round the margin, had encroached much upon the little sheet of water. The path I had followed was continued through the trees, within a few feet of the pond, to the outer edge of the little wood which enclosed the house and garden; there a few rough steps over the fence connected it with the foot-path along the borders of the marsh, which joined the road at the descent of the hill. This was the short cut by which Mr. Rayner had reached the house before us that afternoon.

I had turned back towards the garden, and was close to the pond, when I heard a low crooning sound which seemed to come out of the ground at my feet. Looking about, I saw sitting among the reeds, at the very edge of the water—so close to it that her little shoes kept slipping in the moist yielding earth—a tiny elfish-looking child, about two years old, in a dirty white frock and pinafore, with a small pale wrinkled face and thin straight red hair, who rocked herself to and fro and went on with her monotonous chant without seeming at