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# Dragonwyck

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## Anya Seton

Evil lurked  
in the halls of the great  
house on the Hudson—  
and all who lived there  
felt its presence.



# DRAGONWYCK

Anya Seton

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DRAGONWYCK

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## THE STRANGE BIG HOUSE HID A SECRET.

Something dark and sinister lurked in the huge, quiet rooms—something everyone could feel, but no one could explain.

**Nicholas Van Ryn** didn't try. He believed in his own superiority, he didn't believe in ghosts, and he wasn't the kind of man to let things get in his way.

**Johanna Van Ryn** had been unable to bear her husband a son. Her life was dominated by his disappointment, and she grew fat and careless.

**Miranda Wells** was just a country cousin with dreams of glory. She thought she knew what she wanted, and she wasn't particular how she got it.

**Zélie**, the half-French, half-Indian servant, really knew what was going on, and why. It was her prediction that finally came true.

### DRAGONWYCK

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**Books by Anya Seton**

Devil Water  
Dragonwyck

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## *Author's Note*

THIS STORY was suggested by a news item in the *New York Herald*, 1849, but the main characters are entirely fictional. The historical framework—manor system, anti-rent wars, Astor Place massacre, and steamboat race—is, however, founded on fact, and I have tried to be accurate in presenting it and all background detail.

There was, on the Hudson, a way of life such as this, and there was a house not unlike Dragonwyck. All Gothic magnificence and eerie manifestations were not at that time inevitably confined to English castles or Southern plantations!

I want to thank the patient and helpful librarians at the Greenwich Library, and many kind people who facilitated my research in Hudson, Albany, Kinderhook, Cornwall, and other towns along the river.

I am particularly grateful to Mr. Carl Carmer, not only for his book *The Hudson*, to which I am very much indebted, but for his personal help and interest.

A. S.

From childhood's hour I have not been  
As others were—I have not seen  
As others saw—I could not bring  
My passions from a common spring.  
From the same source I have not taken  
My sorrow; I could not awaken  
My heart to joy at the same tone;  
And all I lov'd, I lov'd alone.  
Then—in my childhood—in the dawn  
Of a most stormy life—was drawn  
From ev'ry depth of good and ill  
The mystery which binds me still:  
From the torrent, or the fountain,  
From the red cliff of the mountain,  
From the sun that 'round me roll'd  
In its autumn tint of gold—  
From the lightning in the sky  
As it pass'd me flying by—  
From the thunder and the storm,  
And the cloud that took the form  
(When the rest of Heaven was blue)  
Of a demon in my view.

*"Alone" by Edgar Allan Poe*

## CHAPTER 1

IT WAS on an afternoon in May of 1844 that the letter came from Dragonwyck.

One of the Mead boys had seen it lying in the Horseneck postoffice, and had thoughtfully carried it with him three miles up the Stanwich road to deliver it at the Wells farmhouse.

When the letter came, Miranda was, most regrettably, doing not one of the tasks which should have occupied the hour from two to three.

She was not in the springhouse churning butter, she was not weeding the vegetable patch, nor even keeping more than half an absent-minded eye on Charity, the baby, who had kicked off her blanket and was chewing on a blade of sweet meadow grass, delighted with her freedom.

Miranda had hidden behind the stone wall in the quiet little family burying-ground on the north side of the apple orchard as far from the house as possible. It was her favorite retreat. The seven tombstones which marked graves of her father's family were no more than seven peaceful friends. Even the tiny stone in the corner beneath the giant elm had no tragic significance though it was marked, "Daniel Wells, son of Ephraim and Abigail Wells, who departed this life April 7th, 1836, aged one year," and covered the body of her baby brother. Miranda had been ten during little Danny's short life, and he was now nothing but a gently poignant memory.

Miranda was curled up against the wall, her pink calico skirts bunched carelessly above her knees in uncharacteristic abandon. A green measuring worm inched himself unchecked across the smooth bodice of her dress. The May breeze, fragrant with appleblossoms and clover from the adjacent pasture, blew her loosened hair into her eyes. She pushed the strand back impatiently with one hand while the other clutched her book, as Miranda devoured the fascinating pages of "The Beautiful Adulteress."



So compelling were the beautiful adulteress's adventures, that even when Miranda's sunbonnet slipped off and hot sunshine fell through the elm trees onto her skin, she did not pause to replace the bonnet. And yet the transparent whiteness of that skin was the envy of her friends and part product of many a tedious treatment with buttermilk and cucumber poultices.

"The Beautiful Adulteress" had been lent by Phoebe Mead, and it must be finished by nightfall so that Phoebe could return it to Deborah Wilson, who had purloined it from her brother's saddlebag.

Despite Miranda's eighteen years and elegant education at Philander Button's Greenwich Academy, despite avid perusal of this and similar books, she had not the vaguest notion of the horrifying behavior that resulted in one's becoming an adulteress. But that point was immaterial.

It was the glorious palpitating romance that mattered. The melancholy heroes, the languishing heroines, the clanking ghosts, dismal castles and supernatural lights; all entrancingly punctuated at intervals by a tender, rapturous—but in any case a guilty—kiss.

Her mother's first call went unheard. It was not until the cry "Ranny—" changed to a louder and sharper "Miranda-a-a! Where in tunket are you?" that the girl jumped. She shoved the book between two stones in the wall, and called hastily, "Coming, Ma!"

She brushed bits of grass and drifted appleblossom off her dress and apron, straightened the black mesh net which confined her masses of soft curling hair during the work day, hair that in the sunlight shone nearly as golden as the buttercups in the pasture behind her.

Then she picked up Charity.

"Oh, shame, lambkin, you're wet again," she said reproachfully.

The baby at once set up an anguished yell; even at a year she resented criticism.

Miranda laughed and kissed the soft neck. "Never mind, pet. Sister isn't really cross." But she sighed, rapidly checking the chores which must be done before dusk.

There was a big batch of the baby's never-ending diapers to be washed and sunned, the butter to be churned, and,

worst of all, a fowl to be slaughtered, plucked, and drawn for the Sabbath dinner tomorrow. Miranda loathed this particular task above all others. The sight of blood sickened her. And whereas her brothers and sister found the antics of the staggering, decapitated chicken funny, Miranda always felt a little spasm of nausea. Equally unpleasant was the later necessity for plunging one's hand into the chicken's slimy entrails.

She usually spent quite ten minutes scrubbing her slender white fingers afterward. A process which Ephraim, her father, viewed with disapproval when he caught her at it.

"Quite the finicking young lady, aren't we, Ranny!" he growled, frowning at her beneath his bushy eyebrows. "The Lord has mercifully provided us with food, and He has no patience with those who think themselves too fine to prepare it."

Ephraim always knew what the Lord was thinking or feeling quite as well as the Reverend Coe did.

Miranda assumed that her mother's summons had to do with the chicken and she walked slowly, shifting the heavy baby from arm to arm and avoiding the barnyard where the destined victim clucked in happy ignorance.

As she walked, she noted absently that the north potato field was deserted and that therefore her father and three brothers must have finished the spraying and moved on ahead of schedule to the great field by Strickland brook. She also noted that the distant blue of the Sound was unusually clear and that she could even see the wooded purplish strip of Long Island on the horizon. That meant rain. But otherwise she saw nothing of the beauty of the rolling Connecticut countryside, the flowering meadows, the rustling wineglass elms and hemlocks greenish-black against the sky. The farm and the sturdy six-room farmhouse were simply home, and she had never been farther than ten miles away from them in her life.

As she entered the dark kitchen, she saw with relief that her mother's gaunt though still handsome face showed neither annoyance at Miranda's tardiness, nor even the habitual pucker of admonition with which she urged her children on to the next inevitable chore.

Abigail, who seldom rested from morning till night, was

sitting on a reed-bottomed chair and staring at a paper which lay unfolded on the kitchen table.

She looked up as her daughter came in. "Here's a strange thing, Ranny. I don't know what to make of it. Can't tell till I've talked with your pa."

Miranda followed her mother's puzzled gaze to the paper on the table. "Why, it's a letter, isn't it!" she cried with lively interest. Not three letters a year came to the Wells farm. "Can I read it?"

"I guess so," said Abigail. "But change the baby first, then knead down the bread dough while I nurse her. Time's wasting."

The girl cast a longing glance at the mysterious letter, but she did as she was told. Abigail flew around the kitchen, cutting bacon with quick, decisive stabs, poking at the embers beneath the oven where the bread would soon be baked. Finally she unbuttoned her bodice, snatched up the hungry baby, and settled on the low nursing chair.

When the dough was set to rise again, Miranda seized the letter. She examined the envelope first. The thick creamy paper was pleasant and unfamiliar as was the bold, rather illegible writing unadorned by the copper-plate flourishes or shaded capitals which she had painstakingly learned at the Academy. The envelope was addressed:

*To Mistress Abigail Wells  
The Stanwich Road  
Horseneck (or Greenwich),  
Connecticut.*

It was postmarked "Hudson, New York," which conveyed nothing to Miranda, who had never heard of the place. But as she put down the envelope and picked up the letter a thrill of excitement ran through her. It was an intuitive flash of certainty that this bland piece of paper was of importance to her, and, though this intuition was pleasurable, it also contained a fleeting apprehension. She read eagerly.

DRAGONWYCK, May 19th, 1844

MY DEAR COUSIN ABIGAIL:

Though we have never met, we are related, as you doubt-

less know, through our mutual grandmother, Annetje Gaansevant.

My wife and I, having discussed the matter at some length, have decided to invite one of your daughters into our home for an extended visit. We shall naturally be able to offer her many advantages which she could not hope to enjoy in her present station. In return, if she pleases, she may occasionally occupy herself with the teaching of our six-year-old child, Katrine, but she will in all ways be treated as befits my kinswoman.

I have had inquiries made and was gratified to find that you and your husband enjoy the honor and respect of your little community. Be so good as to let me know at your earliest convenience which of your daughters you select, and I will make all suitable arrangements for her journey to Dragonwyck.

Believe me, madam, your sincere friend and cousin.

Respectfully yours,

NICHOLAS VAN RYN

Miranda read the letter twice before turning in amazement to her mother. "I don't understand this at all, Ma. Who in the world is Nicholas Van Ryn?"

"He is, I believe, a very grand personage," answered Abigail with a half-smile. "He is lord of a large manor up on the Hudson River somewhere near Albany."

"And you're his cousin?" persisted Miranda, still more astonished.

"It would seem so," replied Abigail dryly. "I remember my mother telling me of the Van Ryns, though I haven't thought of them in years. Bring me the Patterson Bible."

Miranda moved toward the shelf where her father kept his ponderous Bible.

"No, not that one, child," Abigail stopped her. "That one has no records from my side. I want the Bible I brought with me at my marriage. It's in the attic next your Grandfather Patterson's musket and powder horn."

When Miranda had brought the great gilt-edged volume, they examined the records on the fly leaves between the Old and New Testaments.

It was clear enough. Annetje Gaansevant of Rensselaer

County, New York, had in 1779 married Adriaen Van Ryn, patroon of the Van Ryn manor, and borne him a son, Cornelius, who must be the father of Nicholas.

Then after Adriaen Van Ryn's death, Annetje had married again, a Connecticut Yankee named Patterson, and thereupon produced a great many children, the eldest of whom had been Abigail's mother.

"So this Nicholas' grandmother is also my great-grandmother," cried Miranda at last. "I had no idea I had such fine relations." She looked down at her tapering hands. She had always privately thought them aristocratic, and it was pleasant to have confirmation.

"You haven't a scrap of Van Ryn blood," snorted Abigail, "so you needn't go puffing like a peacock. The connection is only through the Gaansevants; Dutch farmers they were like ourselves. And it's just as well, for the Van Ryns are a wild, strange lot with some kind of a skeleton in their closet, for all their money and land and hoity-toity ways."

"Truly, Ma?" cried Miranda, her hazel eyes sparkling. "How vastly romantic! Do tell me, please."

Abigail shifted the baby to the other arm. "I don't know anything to tell. You and your 'vastly romantic'! You've a head stuffed with nonsense now."

"But you must know something about this Nicholas who writes the letter. I suppose he's quite an old man; it's a pity his birth date isn't in the Bible."

"Oh, he's somewhere in middle life, I guess," said Abigail. "About my age. And I know nothing about him except that he has great estates and a town house in New York, and that four years ago, when Van Buren was President, Nicholas often visited at the White House, for I read about it in a newspaper."

"Oh, Ma—" breathed Miranda, quite overcome. "He must be very grand indeed." She considered these revelations for a moment, then she burst out, "You haven't said a word about his letter, the invitation."

She clasped her hands together in a suddenly childish gesture. "Oh, but wouldn't I love to go!"

"And if we should send a daughter, which I think unlikely, why should it be you, miss?" asked Abigail. "Why not Tibby, I'd like to know?"

Miranda frowned. Tabitha was sixteen and even now at the Academy finishing her last term. There was no reason why she should not be chosen except that Miranda felt that she could not bear it if she were.

"Tibby wouldn't want to go," she said slowly. "She's not like me. She doesn't—" Her voice trailed off. Impossible to explain that Tabitha did not hunger after romance, change, adventure, as Miranda did. That she actually enjoyed cooking and washing and housekeeping, that she asked for nothing better in life than to settle down on the next farm with young Obadiah Brown and likely have a parcel of babies right off. But I'm different. I *am*, thought Miranda passionately.

Abigail watched her daughter and read some of these thoughts on the downcast face. Though she would never have admitted it, her firstborn girl was closest of all to her heart. She secretly gloried in Miranda's delicate, small-boned beauty, in her fastidiousness and dainty ways. She thought her remarkably like one of those exquisite creatures in *Godey's Lady's Book*, the same graceful height, small nose, and full, pouting lips.

She pretended not to see when Miranda fussed over her complexion, guarding its pink and whiteness from freckles or sunburn with as much anxious care as might a fashionable New York lady. And she sympathized with the girl's restlessness and vague, youthful dreams. Abigail had had them, too, long ago before she married the estimable Ephraim and life flattened into a monotony of never-ending work and baby-tending.

"So," she said with her normal crispness, "just like that, and with your usual lack of prudent thought, you 'want to go.' You don't consider whether I might be able to spare you, nor do you even seem to think that you might miss us here."

Miranda looked up, stricken. She rushed across the room and put her arms around her mother's thin shoulders, resting her cheek on the brown head that was already finely threaded with gray. "Oh, Ma, dear, of course I'd miss you. It's just that—that it seems so rarely exciting an opportunity."

Abigail smiled faintly, and Miranda knew that, whether

or not she would be allowed to go to Dragonwyck, there would be no real question of Tabitha's going.

Her mother straightened, buttoned her bodice, and placed the sleeping baby in the cradle. Then she seized the holystone and began scouring the oak drain board. "We'll say no more about the matter now. Hurry up and kill that old white hen; she'll be a mite tough, but the others are laying well, and she'll have to do." She glanced at the Seth Thomas banjo clock that was her great pride. "We're shockingly behind with the work. The men will be in from the fields before supper's near ready."

After the evening meal, the May night being warm, the family gathered in the parlor instead of the kitchen for Scripture reading and prayer.

Ephraim seated himself in the armed Windsor chair beside the cherry-wood center table. His open Bible lay before him and he kept one blunt finger in readiness on the chapter heading. Not a hair of his brown beard quivered. His eyes were stern and nearly motionless while he waited for each one's respectful attention. They were all there, his wife and five older children, seated on stiff chairs in a prim row. Only the baby, gurgling in her cradle by the kitchen fireplace, was exempt.

Next to Abigail sat Tom, the oldest of her brood. He was staid and responsible, already despite his scant twenty years a duplicate of his father whom he greatly admired.

Seth and Nathaniel, the two other boys, aged fourteen and twelve, cast longing looks out the window and wondered if the light would hold long enough for a game of Run Sheep Run with the Reynolds boys. But they knew better than to wriggle. Many a strapping in the woodshed had taught them that.

At the other end of the row, beside Miranda, sat Tabitha. Her hands were folded demurely in her lap, her plump, freckled face was set to the proper expression of piety.

Only Miranda found it nearly impossible to restrain her fidgets. She knew that Ephraim had read the startling letter, and knew also that any discussion of it was impossible until evening worship was concluded.

During the fifteen of her eighteen years that Miranda had

taken part in family worship, she had heard the Bible read through six times; and though Ephraim read well, rolling the sonorous phrases and giving considered emphasis to every word, she had long ago perfected a method of enjoying her own thoughts from which she emerged only to say "Amen" with the others at the end of each chapter.

And yet, in spite of herself, she had soaked in a great deal of the poetry and imagery. Sometimes certain phrases mingled with her daydreams, and seemed to touch off delightful little explosions in her mind. It was so tonight, despite—or perhaps because of—her preoccupation with the letter from Dragonwyck.

Ephraim read from the twenty-sixth chapter of Ezekiel, and her attention was caught by verses which meant nothing to her consciously, though they had power to strike through mist and show her glimpses of a dim, enchanted country.

"Then all the princes of the sea shall come down from their thrones . . . they shall clothe themselves with trembling," said Ephraim's measured voice. It didn't make much sense, thought Miranda, but somehow it was beautiful.

Ephraim dropped to a lower, menacing voice. "How art thou destroyed, that wast inhabited of seafaring men, the renowned city, which wast strong in the sea, she and her inhabitants, which cause their terror to be on all that haunt it."

A little shiver ran through her, and a sensation of strangeness. She would not have dared move her head, but her eyes roamed round the familiar room. There was the wide, seldom-lit fireplace with the pewter candlesticks on the mantel. There on the whitewashed walls hung the sampler her Grandmother Finch had worked, and the silhouette profiles of her mother and father which had been cut on their wedding day.

On the oak plank floor lay the hooked rugs that she and Tabitha had labored through many a winter's evening to finish. There in the west window through which glanced the last red rays of the setting sun was the cracked pane, result of an impulsive snowball thrown by Tom years ago.

Everything was commonplace and dull. What had they all to do with "princes of the sea, renowned cities, terror or hauntings"?



“Fine linen with brodered work from Egypt . . . blue and purple from the Isles of Elisha,” intoned Ephraim, now well into the next chapter . . . “occupied in thy fairs with chief of all spices, and with all precious stones, and gold.”

Miranda felt a wave of sharp yearning. She saw them heaped about her in a marble courtyard, the fine embroidered linens from Egypt, the spices, the precious stones and the gold. She looked at her parents, at her brothers' and sister's expressionless faces. How could they listen so calmly! Even the Bible admitted that the world was full of mystery and beauty and golden perfumed luxury. How then could they be content with sweaty homespun, with the odors of stable and barnyard, and with no gold but potatoes and little spring onions?

The low room was full of the smell of onions. The boys had been pulling them all day, and the white and green shoots lay neatly stacked in open crates outside the kitchen windows waiting for the dawn, when Tom would pile them in the wagon and drive them to the Mianus docks for shipment to New York.

There was a small scuffle, and Miranda fell to her knees with the rest of the family as her father shut his Bible and began to pray.

He always talked to God in much the manner of a senior member of the faculty reporting progress to a respected principal. He touched on the faults of each one of the family, not excepting himself sometimes. He occasionally reported some commendable act (though this honor was usually reserved for Tabitha), and he finished with an intimate and entirely confident request for guidance. Tonight there was an added clause.

“This day, O Lord,” said Ephraim, “there has come to me a matter of some slight perplexity. Deliver us, we pray, from the pitfalls of rashness or hankering after the fleshpots.” Here he looked briefly at Miranda. “And deliver us from the sins of arrogance and false pride.” This time Ephraim's stern gaze rested upon his wife.

The situation was therefore clear to Miranda. Her father did not approve of the letter. Disappointment overwhelmed her, nor was it lessened by Ephraim's final words. “However, O God, Thy will be done, and whatsoever Thou decidest for