



The Inheritance (Penguin Classics)

Louisa May Alcott

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Louisa May Alcott, who spent much of her childhood amid an intellectual circle that included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Thoreau, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, embarked on her own literary efforts at an early age. Her recently discovered first novel, *The Inheritance*, written when Alcott was just 17, offers readers a fascinating look at the birth of a remarkable career. Influenced by the melodrama of the contemporary theater, the sentimental romances she read as a child, and the popular gothic novels of the time, Alcott weaves a tale far removed from the reality of her everyday life in Boston. The Inheritance, set in an English country manor, is the story of Edith Adelon, an Italian orphan brought to England by Lord Hamilton as a companion for his children. With a charm reminiscent of Jane Austen's novels, Alcott's plot sets love and courtesy against depravity and dishonor -- and with the help of a secret inheritance, allows virtue to prevail. In their Introduction, Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy relate their fortuitous discovery of Alcott's manuscript draft of *The Inheritance* (preserved at the Houghton Library of Harvard). They explore the forces -- both literary and personal -- that shaped the novel, and study how it foreshadowed Alcott's later work.

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