



House in the Shadows

Maria Messina

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First published in Italy in 1921, this short novel is a dark, grim account of two Sicilian women's voluntary imprisonment in the elder's dull, dour marriage. Sisters Nicolina and Antonietta see their chance to flee their small Italian village when Don Lucio announces his intentions to marry Antonietta. They envision a grand life for themselves in Lucio's large, gloomy house in the city--but their taste of freedom proves fleeting. Nicolina dwindles to an unpaid drudge for her sister's family, while Antonietta fares only slightly better as a wife-of-all-work and beleaguered mother. Together the housebound pair ministers to the touchy Don (a domineering, wily paterfamilias and likely crook whose cunning they barely sense) and withers gradually in servitude. After the Don seduces Nicolina, the sisters' friendship ends, and further tragedy intrudes in the self-inflicted death of Antonietta's young son. Though dated in her fairy-tale-like simplicity of character, Messina, who died in 1944, wrote with courage and understated strength of a narrow, prototypically female life singed by masochistic fury.

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