

# The Gate of Understanding

By EDITH BARNARD

WHEN the operation was successfully over, the last bandage adjusted, and the last words of direction spoken to the attendants, the white-gowned surgeon passed through the white-tiled doorway into the doctors' room, glad to escape the heavily etherised atmosphere, glad to pass by the admiring, respectful, awe-filled faces of the younger men, glad to throw aside the red-spotted garment and to feel the soft lather of soap and water on his hands and face.

The operation had been of the most dangerous, but it was neither fear for the man's life nor doubt of his own success in saving it that, during the hours just past, set the doctor's lips in a firmer line than usual, made his voice harsh and grating in the few sentences he spoke to the men and the nurses, and sent him from the operating-room nervously fatigued and restless. He had seen the man only twice before he was wheeled, etherised, into the glass-lined room, and both times as a patient, as one of the many in the great hospital. He had been a case, a problem, scarcely a man; his life was a matter of breathing and heart beats rather than of work, play, love; but this morning his standing as a patient's case, had been changed suddenly into that of a human entity.

The morning had seen cold, very cold, and the doctor's man drove the horses up and down the street. The doctor himself, overcoated at last, opened the door of his house; a coupe which he thought his own was stopping before it. He had turned back for his small black bag, and when he reached the door again a woman was mounting the steps, close to him. The doctor frowned impatiently, but the woman had said at once, imperiously:

"I know you have no time, Doctor Brooke, but I am his wife."

Surprised, involuntarily the doctor stepped aside, and she went past him into the house, her furs brushing against him. Then, in the hall—it had been terrible, ghastly! There was nothing hysterical about her; it would have been easier for him if there had been. He knew how to deal with hysterics, but before this blaze of emotion he was helpless, amazed. She was not of the class which readily bares its feelings, nor, indeed, of that smaller class which feels intensely. The doctor knew by every evidence of her dress and manner, even of her face, that life had been easy for her; yet here she was in his dim hallway, baring her soul, tearing its motives and passions apart with an intensity which he had never seen equaled. The doctor had seen the human heart, un-fleshed, palpitating with its own marvelous life-force; the sight was not as awe-inspiring as that of this woman's dissecting her own heart's motives and depths. The face of the lady of quietly ordered life changed before his eyes into a mask of tragedy.

The man on whom he was to operate that day was her husband; they had been good enough friends, but had amused themselves in different ways. Now that he might die, she knew that she must have him back. There was so much for life to give them! She must show him! The doctor must save him. She must, must have him back! That was the substance of her wild appeal, and it was in itself commonplace enough; it was her fierce intensity of suffering and demand that made it wonder.

Her eyes were the colour of Helen's, and the patient, the case, the senseless human thing which he had just cut, was

the man whose danger had made them glow, broken the surface of the wife's reserve of coldness, selfishness, indifference, stirred the under-depths of her soul into this anguished call for help, this insistence on rescue. Her eyes were like Helen's, but Helen's eyes had never held that look! The doctor wondered whether they ever would, or could; whether it would be given to him to awaken it. How would it be, he wondered, when that man should see his wife, the wife who must, must have him back! How would it be if Helen—

The doctor shook himself impatiently, went out of the great bronze door of the hospital, down the long flight of stone steps, and started to walk towards the west. He was half angry with himself because of his fancies, his dreams. He told himself that he was no schoolboy, to indulge himself with castles of air; that the woman of the morning had upset him, with her pleadings and commands; that overwork was telling on him, and that if he only had the time he would take a Sunday at Hot Springs. He told himself everything but the truth; yet as he walked towards the winter's sunset towards Helen's home, he knew very well that it was the memory of the woman's eyes which was making his heart pound—eyes which were like Helen's, but with that wonderful living glow in them which had been called up by her tardy realisation of her need of the man, and of her love for him.

He would not let himself dwell on the dream of what Helen's eyes might hold, for that thought but emphasised the other—that for him they had never held more or less than the friendliest, manliest good-fellowship. He did not believe they had shown more to Robert—his friend Robert, his successful rival with the young girl who was the most brilliant beauty of her season. He had taken the part of best man at their wedding with no bitterness whatever, for it seemed no more than natural, and right that Helen should take Carroll, who had everything to give, rather than himself, who had everything to make. His love for the two was never shaken, and that his friend understood him was proved when, dying six years later, Robert made the doctor trustee for Helen and guardian of the baby. No word was ever spoken between the two men to indicate whether Robert had found in his marriage all that he had hoped for. Helen was gay and clever, proud of her health, her beauty, money, name, playing through life like a child; and as a child gathers flowers and more flowers only to throw the first aside for more, so she had danced through every pleasure, always leading, always seeking and finding more and more. She had not wanted the child, but when he came she was proud of him, too. The years of her marriage had wrought less change in her than those of her widowhood, but all had not changed her more than they had changed the doctor. If she was now the brilliant woman that her small world of pleasure sought, he was the great surgeon, sought by all worlds of suffering; and still they were friends, and, even as in Robert's time, he was her familiar house-guest, the friendliest and most welcome.

The man at the door told him that Mrs. Carroll was in the library upstairs, and added, with a slight, apologetic cough for his familiarity as the old servant:

"Master Robert is not very well today, Doctor."

"I'll take a look at him before I go,"

the doctor replied, and the man watched him mount the stairs, an affectionate look on his face. Before he returned to the back of the house he noticed a speck of mud on the doctor's long coat, carefully brushed it off, and looked for more, before hanging it up again. It was a way the servants had with the doctor. All of them, even those in his friends' houses, took care of him.

Helen came from the fire to meet him. The doctor could not bring himself to look directly into her eyes, and he was all the more conscious of the rest of her. Someone once said that Mrs. Carroll was always in winter the warmest looking of women, and in summer the coolest, and the doctor remembered this and smiled. This afternoon the warm reddish brown of her dress gave colour to her hair, which was really of that "blood red," which is more gray than golden, and the fire back of her was scarcely more a thing of flame and shadow than was she.

"I was sure you would come," he said, "I am home early for you, and I'm starving!" She gave him the friendliest of smiles, and then, after a glance at his face, she added, "And so are you!"

Without speaking, the doctor sank heavily into a large chair, rested his head on its back, and watched her. All of her movements were strong and calm; in everything she did there was evidence of the poise and reserve that goes with perfect health and accustomed self-control. Her actions were really quick, but never seemed so. The doctor was always soothed and rested by merely watching her, and this afternoon her handling of the tea things, her deftness and sureness, quite took his mind from the troublesome day.

She did not speak until she had given him his cup, and was seated, with another, at the opposite side of the fireplace. Then she began to talk to him of a thousand things—her day, her friends, the Symphony the night before, the last new play; she quoted the latest saying of their witliest friend, reported the progress of another's love-affair, repeated a remark of Bobby's, told about a visit to his school.

The doctor drank his tea and poured himself a second and third cup, without answering her in words; he nodded once or twice, smiled grimly at her quotation, laughed at Bobby's speech, and was rested by it all. When he finished his third cup he sat with his elbows on the arm of the big chair, his hands before his face, their fingers lightly touching, and with his head bent slightly forward.

Helen watched him in silence for a few moments, and then asked:

"Tired?"

The doctor roused himself and smiled at her. "I was tired, yes," he answered, "but you've rested me." Then he added, to her surprise:

"I've had a hard day."

It was the first time in all their acquaintance that he had spoken, however indirectly, of his work. Even his greatest achievements, the marvels of surgery that had made his name world-wide, she had learned only with the rest of the world.

"Can you tell me about it?" she asked.

"I want to," he said. "It's got hold of me, somehow. I want to tell you."

She listened to his story of the morning; he did not speak of the subsequent operation on the man, except to explain that the encounter with the woman had made it difficult, and he added, had made his own nerves uncertain. He need not have said the last, however, for the effect was still evident in his restlessly moving around the room while telling the story;

when he finished he stood looking down into the fire.

Helen's first question was the inevitable one. "Will he live?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," the doctor answered, "he will live. But—"

"But," she laughed, "when he is well again the woman will probably find herself just where she was before he was ill. A variation on the old theme that when 'The devil was sick—the devil a monk would be.'"

The doctor said quickly, sharply, "Don't talk like that!"

She flushed a little. "No," she said, "I will not. That was foolishly spoken—and, besides, not true. I see the meaning of it as plainly as you do, Roger. Tell me, was she of—our sort?"

"Oh, perfectly," the doctor said. Then, after a pause, he added, "The way she let herself go, the revelation of herself!"

"She probably didn't half realise it all until she told you!"

"But to come to me, a stranger—Jove! I thought of it every second while I was cutting that unconscious man, thought of the poor devil's missing the moment of her that would have been supreme for him."

She followed her own line of thought, rather than his. "It was fine, dramatic! That revelation doesn't always come, even when there is something to be revealed, you know!"

He turned to her quickly. "That's it," he said, "that is what upset me. Suppose the chap had never been taken ill; suppose she had never found out all that! Think what they have both been missing, what they might never have known!"

She was as keenly interested in it as he. "It was worth the price!" she said.

The doctor looked at her, and spoke the key-note of his thought. "Helen," he said, "her eyes were like yours!"

She did not move or speak, but there was a tenseness about her that showed she understood. The doctor looked at her for a moment, moved restlessly, then laid his arm along the mantel shelf and closed his fingers over its corner, as if steadily fixing himself.

"Helen, I've been wondering all day—"

She could not help him, could not move or speak, although she would have given much to prevent his speaking.

"Her eyes—I've been wondering whether you may not be denying yourself and me, whether you just haven't been made to find out!" The appeal of his hesitating sentences was tremendous, but still she would not look at him, and only shook her head from side to side.

"No, Roger, no! That doesn't come to all of us! I know myself. I am not made for deep emotions, for great strength of feeling."

"Her eyes were like yours," he repeated. It was her turn to be restless now. Presently she came and stood in front of him, and touched his arm.

"Roger," she said, "I cannot make myself anything but what I am. You are the best and dearest friend I have in the world, and I'd rather spend an hour with you than with anyone else. You—she looked up at him quickly—"you are too good to me, but it isn't anything in me that makes me so. It's just your own greatness. If I could match your love, my dear, I'd—"

She moved away again, and when she came back her face was flushed, her eyes shining with the tears held back. The doctor knew her difficulty in saying so much. There had always been about her, even in Robert's day, a certain quality of maidenly reserve or hesitation, a sort of