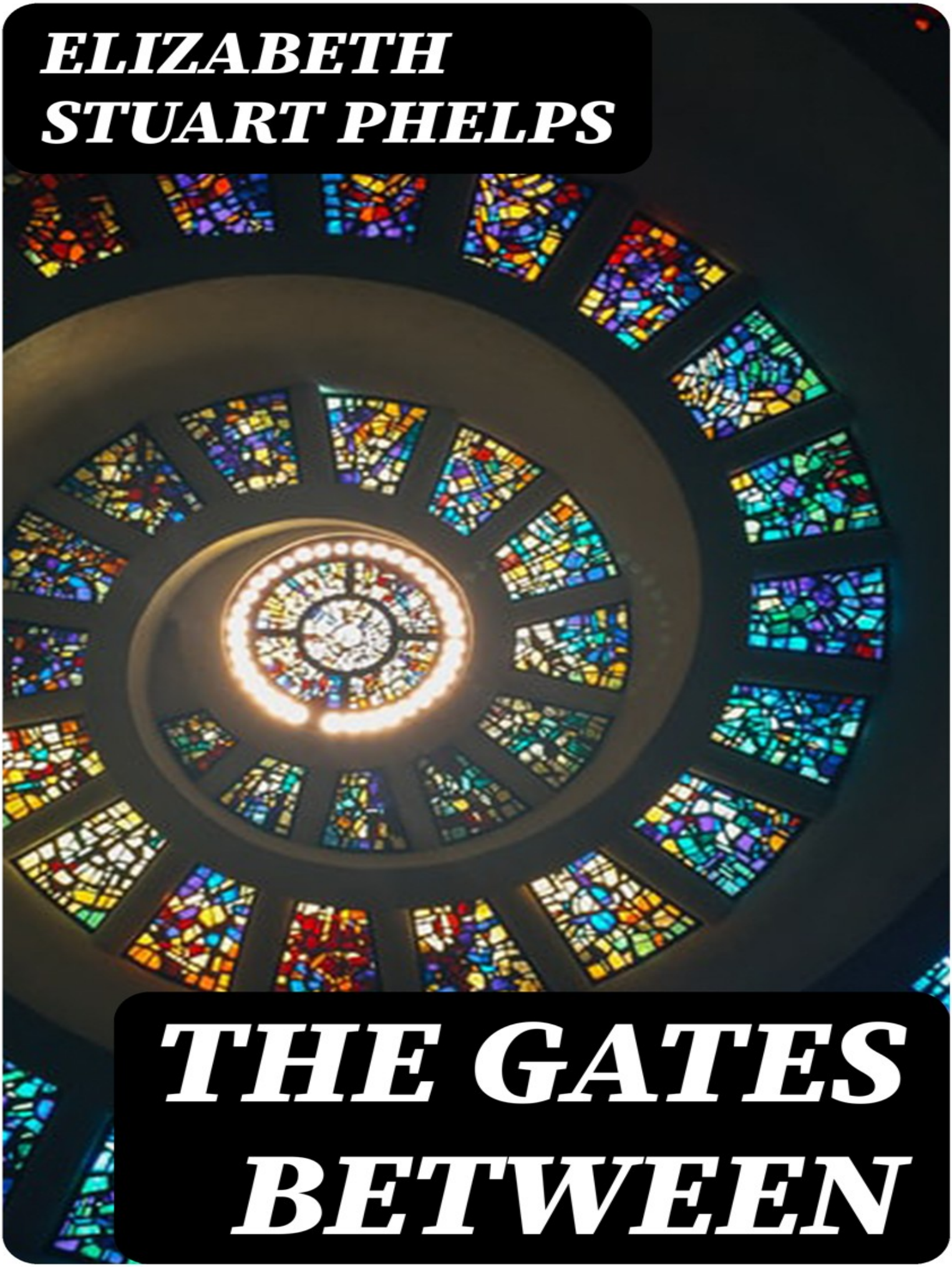
ELIZABETH STUART PHELPS



THE GATES BETWEEN

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The Gates Between

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CHAPTER I.

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If the narrative which I am about to recount perplex the reader, it can hardly do so more than it has perplexed the narrator. Explanations, let me say at the start, I have none to offer. That which took place I relate. I have had no special education or experience as a writer; both my nature and my avocation have led me in other directions. I can claim nothing more in the construction of these pages than the qualities of a faithful reporter. Such, I have tried to be.

It was on the twenty-fifth of November of the year 187-, that I, Esmerald Thorne, fell upon the event whose history and consequences I am about to describe.

Autobiographies I do not like. I should have been positive at any time during my life of forty-nine years, that no temptation could drag me over that precipice of presumption and illusion which awaits the man who confides himself to the world. As it is the unexpected which happens, so it is the unwelcome which we choose. I do not tell this story for my own gratification. I tell it to fulfil the heaviest responsibility of my life. However I may present myself upon these pages is the least of my concern; whether well or ill, that is of the smallest possible consequence. Touching the manner of my telling the story, I have heavy thoughts; for I know that upon the manner of the telling will depend effects too far beyond the scope of any one human personality for me to regard them indifferently. I wish I could. I have reason to believe myself the bearer of a message to many men. This belief is in itself enough, one would say, to deplete a

man of paltry purpose. I wish to be considered only as the messenger, who comes and departs, and is thought of no more. The message remains, and should remain, the only material of interest.

Owing to some peculiarities in the situation, I am unable to delegate, and do not see my way to defer, a duty—for I believe it to be a duty—which I shall therefore proceed to perform with as little apology as possible. I must trust to the gravity of my motive to overcome every trifling consideration in the mind of my readers; as it has solemnly done in my own.

In order to give force to my narrative, it will be necessary for me to be more personal in some particulars than I could have chosen, and to revert to certain details of my early history belonging to that category which people of my profession or temperament are wont to dismiss as "emotional." I have had strange occasion to learn that this is a deep and delicate word, which can never be scientifically used, which cannot be so much as elementally understood, except by delicacy and by depth. These are precisely the qualities of which this is to be said,—he who most lacks them will be most unaware of the lack.

There is a further peculiarity about such unconsciousness; that it is not material for education. You can teach a man that he is not generous, or true, or able. You can never teach him that he is superficial, or that he is not fine.

I have been by profession a physician; the son of a chemist; the grandson of a surgeon; a man fairly illustrative

of the subtler significance of these circumstances; born and bred, as the children of science are;—a physical fact in a world of physical facts; a man who rises, if ever, by miracle, to a higher set of facts; who thinks the thought of his father, who does the deed of his father's father, who contests the heredity of his mother, who shuts the pressure of his special education like a clasp about his nature, and locks it down with the iron experience of his calling.

It was given to me, as it is not given to all men of my kind, to know a woman strong enough—and sweet enough—to fit a key unto this lock.

Strong enough *or* sweet enough, I should rather have said. The two are truly the same. The old Hebrew riddle read well, that "out of strength shall come forth sweetness." There is the lioness behind the rarest honey.

Like others of my calling, I had seen the best and the worst and the most of women. The pathological view of that complex subject is the most unfortunate which a man can well have. The habit of classifying a woman as neuralgic, hysteric, dyspeptic, instead of unselfish, intellectual, high-minded, is not a wholesome one for the classifier. Something of the abnormal condition of the *clientèle* extends to the adviser. A physician who has a healthy and natural view of women has the making of a great man in him.

I was not a great man. I was only a successful lector; more conscious in those days of the latter fact, and less of the former, be it admitted, than I am now. A man's avocation may be at once his ruin and his exculpation. I do not know whether I was more self-confident or even more

wilful than other men to whom is given the autocracy of our profession, and the dependence of women which accompanies it. I should not wish to have the appearance of saying an unmanly thing, if I add that this dependence had wearied me.

It is more likely to be true that I differed from most other men in this: that in all my life I have known but one woman whom I loved, or wished to make my wife. I was forty-five years old before I saw her.

Who of us has not felt at the Play, the strong allegorical power in the coming of the first actress before the house? The hero may pose, the clown dance, the villain plot, the warrior, the king, the merchant, the page, fuddle the attention for the nonce: it is a dreary business; it is like parsing poetry; it is a grammatical duty; the Play could not, it seems, go on without these superfluities. We listen, weary, regret, find fault, and acquire an aversion, when lo! upon the monotonous, masculine scene, some slender creature, shining, all white gown and yellow hair and soft arms and sweet curves comes gliding—and, hush! with the Everwomanly, the Play begins.

I do not think this feeling is one peculiar to our sex alone; I have heard women express the same in the strongest terms.

So, I have sometimes thought it is with the coming of the Woman upon the stage of a man's life. If the scenes have shifted for a while too long, monopolized by the old dismal male actors whose trick and pose and accent he knows so well and understands too easily,—and if, then, half-through the drama, late and longed-for, tardily and splendidly,

comes the Star, and if she be a fine creature, of a high fame, and worthy of it,—ah, then look you to her spectator. Rapt and rapturous she will hold him till the Play is done.

So she found me—held me—holds me. The best of it, thank God, is the last of it. So, I can say, she holds me to this hour, where and as we are.

It was on this wise. On my short summer vacation of that year from which I date my happiness, and which I used to call The Year of my Lady, as others say The Year of Our Lord, I tarried for a time in a mountain village, unfashionable and beautiful, where my city patients were not likely to hunt me down. Fifty-three of them had followed me to the seashore the year before, and I went back to town a harder-worked man than I left it. Even a doctor has a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of a vacation, and that time I struck out for my rights. I cut adrift—denied my addresses even to my partner—and set forth upon a walking tour alone, among the hills. Upon one point my mind was made up: I would not see a sick woman for two weeks.

I arrived at this little town of which I speak upon a Saturday evening. I remember that it was an extraordinary evening. Thunder came up, and clouds of colours such as I found remarkable. I am not an adept in describing these things, but I remember that they moved me. I went out and followed the trout-brook, which was a graceful little stream, and watched the pageant in the skies above the tops of the forest. The trees on either side of the tiny current had the look of souls regarding each other across a barrier, so solemn were they. They stood with their gaze upon the

heavens and their feet rooted to the earth, and seemed like sentient creatures who knew why this was as it was.

I, walking with my eyes upon them, feet unguarded, and fancy following a cloud of rose-colour that hung fashioned in the outline of a mighty wing above me, caught my foot in a gnarled old hickory root and fell heavily. When I tried to rise I found that I was considerably hurt.

I was a well, vigorous man, not accustomed to pain, which took a vigorous form with me; and I was mortified to find myself quite faint, too much so even to disturb myself over the situation, or to wonder who would be likely to institute a searching-party for me,—a stranger, but an hour since, registered at the hotel.

With that ease which I condemned so hotly in my patients I abandoned myself to the physical pang, got back somehow against the hickory, and closed my eyes; devoid even of curiosity as to the consequences of the accident; only "attentive to my sensations," as a great writer of my day put it. I had often quoted him to nervous people whom I considered as exaggerating their sufferings; I did not recall the quotation at that moment.

"Oh! you are hurt!" a low voice said.

I was a bit fastidious in voices at that time of my life. To say that this was the sweetest I had ever heard would not express what I mean. It was the *dearest* I had ever heard. From that first moment,—before I saw her face,—drowned as I was in that wave of mean physical agony, given over utterly to myself, I knew, and to myself I said: "It is the dearest voice in all this world."

A woman on the further side of the trout-brook stood uncertain, pitifully regarding me. She was not a girl,—quite a woman; ripe, and self-possessed in bearing. She had a beautiful head, and bright dark hair; her head was bare, and her straw mountain-hat hung across one arm by the strings. She had been bathing her face in the water, which was of a pink tint like the wing above it. As she stood there, she seemed to be shut in and guarded by, dripping with, that rose-colour,—to inhale it, to exhale it, to be a part of it, to be *it*. She looked like a blossom of the live and wonderful evening.

"You are seriously hurt," she repeated. "I must get to you. Have patience; I will find a way. I will help you."

The bridge was at some distance from us, and the little stream was brawling and strong.

"But it is not deep," she said. "Do not feel any concern. It will do me no harm." As she spoke, she swung herself lightly over into the brook, stepping from stone to stone, till these came to an abrupt end in the current. There for an instant poised, but one could not say uncertain, she hung shining before me—for her dress was white, and it took and took and took the rose-colour as if she were a white rose, blushing. She then plunged directly into the water, which was knee-deep at least, and waded straight across to me.

As she climbed the bank, her thick wet dress clinging to her lovely limbs, and her hands outstretched as if in hurrying pity, I closed my eyes again before her. I thought, as I did so, how much exquisite pleasure was like perfect pain.

She climbed the bank and stooped from her tall height to look at me; knelt upon the moss, and touched me impersonally, like the spirit that she seemed.

"You are very wet!" I cried. "The water is cold. I know these mountain brooks. You will be chilled through. Pray get home and send me—somebody."

"Where are you hurt?" she answered, with a little authoritative wave of the hand, as if she waved my words away. She had firm, fine hands.

"I have injured the patella—I mean the knee-pan," I replied. She smiled indulgently. She did not take the trouble to tell me that my lesson in elementary anatomy was at all superfluous. But when I saw her smile I said:—

"That was unconscious cerebration."

"Why, of course," she answered, nodding pleasantly.

"Go home," I urged. "Go and get yourself out of these wet things. No lady can bear it; it will injure you." She lifted her head,—I thought she carried it like a Greek,—and regarded me with her wide, grave eyes. I met hers firmly, and for a moment we considered each other.

"It is plain that you are a doctor," she said lightly, with a second smile. "I presume you never see a well woman; at least—believe you see one now. I shall mind this wetting no more than if I were a trout or a gray squirrel. I am perfectly able to give you whatever help you require. And by your leave, I shall not go home and get into a dry dress until I see you properly cared for. Now! Can you step? Or shall I get a waggon, and a farm-hand? I think we could back a horse down almost to this spot. But it would take time. So?—Will you try it? Gently. Slowly. Don't *let* me hurt you, or blunder. I

see that you are in great pain. Don't be afraid to lean on me. I am quite strong. I am able. If you can crawl a few steps"—

Steps! I would have crawled a few miles. For she put her sweet arms about me as simply and nobly as if I had been a wounded child; and with such strength of the flesh and unconsciousness of the spirit as I had never beheld in any woman, she did indeed support me out of the forest in such wise that my poor pain of the body became a great and glorified fact, for the joy of soul that I had because of her.

It had begun to be easy, in my day, to make a mock at many dear and delicate beliefs; not those alone which pertain to the life eternal, but those belonging to the life below. The one followed from the other, perhaps. That which we have been accustomed to call love was an angel whose wings had been bruised by our unbelieving clutch. It was not the fashion to love greatly. One of the leading scientists of my time and of my profession had written: "There is nothing particularly holy about love." So far as I had given thought to the subject, I had, perhaps, agreed with him. It is easy for a physician to agree to anything which emphasizes the visible, and erases the invisible fact. If there were any one form of the universal delusion more than all others "gone out" in the days of which I speak, it was the dear, old-fashioned delirium called loving at first sight. I was never exactly a scoffer; but I had mocked at this fable as other men of my sort mock,—a subject for prophylactics, like measles or scarlet fever; and when you said that, you had said the whole. Be it, then, recorded, be it admitted, without let or hindrance, that I, Esmerald Thorne, physician and surgeon, forty-five years old, and of sane mind, did love that

one woman, and her only, and her always, from the moment that my unworthy eyes first looked into her own, as she knelt before me on the moss beside the mountain brook,—from that moment to this hour.

CHAPTER II.

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Thus half in perfect poetry, part in simplest prose, opened the first canto of that long song which has made music in me; which has made music of me, since that happy night. Of the countless words which we have exchanged together in times succeeding, these, the few of our first meeting are carved upon my brain as salutations are carved in stone above the doorways of mansions. He that has loved as I did, may say why this should be so, if he can. I cannot. Time and storm beat against these inscriptions, and give them other colouring,—the tints of years and weather; but while the house lasts and the rock holds the salutation lives. In most other matters, the force of recurring experience weakens association. He who loves cherishes the first words of the beloved as he cherishes her last.

The situation was simple enough: an injured man and a lovely woman, guests of the same summer hotel; a slow recovery; a leisurely sweet acquaintance; the light that never was on hill or shore; and so the charm was wrought. My accident held me a prisoner for six weeks. But my love put me in chains in six minutes.

Her name was Helen; like hers of old

"Who fired the topmost towers of Ilium."

I liked the stately name of her, for she was of full womanhood,—thirty-three years old; the age at which the