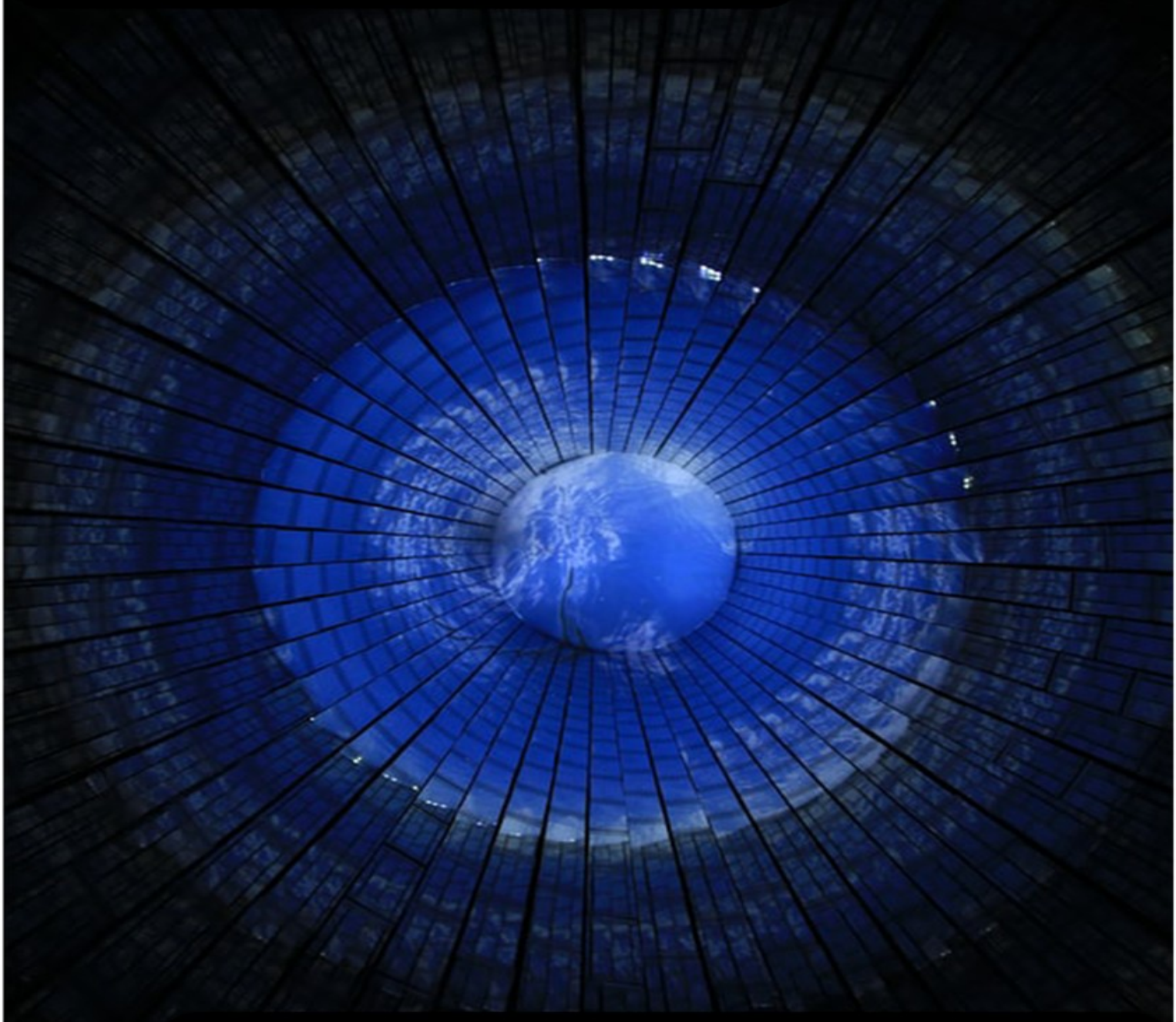
ELIZABETH
STUART PHELPS



THE GATES AJAR

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I.

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ONE week; only one week to-day, this twenty-first of February.

I have been sitting here in the dark and thinking about it, till it seems so horribly long and so horribly short; it has been such a week to live through, and it is such a small part of the weeks that must be lived through, that I could think no longer, but lighted my lamp and opened my desk to find something to do.

I was tossing my paper about,—only my own: the packages in the yellow envelopes I have not been quite brave enough to open yet,—when I came across this poor little book in which I used to keep memoranda of the weather, and my lovers, when I was a school-girl. I turned the leaves, smiling to see how many blank pages were left, and took up my pen, and now I am not smiling any more.

If it had not come exactly as it did, it seems to me as if I could bear it better. They tell me that it should not have been such a shock. “Your brother had been in the army so long that you should have been prepared for anything. Everybody knows by what a hair a soldier’s life is always hanging,” and a great deal more that I am afraid I have not listened to. I suppose it is all true; but that never makes it any easier.

The house feels like a prison. I walk up and down and wonder that I ever called it home. Something is the matter with the sunsets; they come and go, and I do not notice them. Something ails the voices of the children, snowballing

down the street; all the music has gone out of them, and they hurt me like knives. The harmless, happy children!—and Roy loved the little children.

Why, it seems to me as if the world were spinning around in the light and wind and laughter, and God just stretched down His hand one morning and put it out.

It was such a dear, pleasant world to be put out!

It was never dearer or more pleasant than it was on that morning. I had not been as happy for weeks. I came up from the Post-Office singing to myself. His letter was so bright and full of mischief! I had not had one like it all the winter. I have laid it away by itself, filled with his jokes and pet names, “Mamie” or “Queen Mamie” every other line, and signed

“Until next time, your happy

Roy.”

I wonder if all brothers and sisters keep up the baby-names as we did. I wonder if I shall ever become used to living without them.

I read the letter over a great many times, and stopped to tell Mrs. Bland the news in it, and wondered what had kept it so long on the way, and wondered if it could be true that he would have a furlough in May. It seemed too good to be true. If I had been fourteen instead of twenty-four, I should have jumped up and down and clapped my hands there in the street. The sky was so bright that I could scarcely turn up my eyes to look at it. The sunshine was shivered into little lances all over the glaring white crust. There was a snow-bird chirping and pecking on the maple-tree as I came in.

I went up and opened my window; sat down by it and drew a long breath, and began to count the days till May. I must have sat there as much as half an hour. I was so happy counting the days that I did not hear the front gate, and when I looked down a man stood there,—a great, rough man,—who shouted up that he was in a hurry, and wanted seventy-five cents for a telegram that he had brought over from East Homer. I believe I went down and paid him, sent him away, came up here and locked the door before I read it.

Phœbe found me here at dinner-time.

If I could have gone to him, could have busied myself with packing and journeying, could have been forced to think and plan, could have had the shadow of a hope of one more look, one word, I suppose I should have taken it differently. Those two words—“Shot dead”—shut me up and walled me in, as I think people must feel shut up and walled in, in Hell. I write the words most solemnly, for I know that there has been Hell in my heart.

It is all over now. He came back, and they brought him up the steps, and I listened to their feet,—so many feet; he used to come bounding in. They let me see him for a minute, and there was a funeral, and Mrs. Bland came over, and she and Phœbe attended to everything, I suppose. I did not notice nor think till we had left him out there in the cold and had come back. The windows of his room were opened, and the bitter wind swept in. The house was still and damp. Nobody was there to welcome me. Nobody would ever be * * * *

Poor old Phœbe! I had forgotten her. She was waiting at the kitchen window in her black bonnet; she took off my things and made me a cup of tea, and kept at work near me for a little while, wiping her eyes. She came in just now, when I had left my unfinished sentence to dry, sitting here with my face in my hands.

“Laws now, Miss Mary, my dear! This won’t never do,—a rebellin’ agin Providence, and singein’ your hair on the lamp chimney this way! The dining-room fire’s goin’ beautiful, and the salmon is toasted to a brown. Put away them papers and come right along!”

II.

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February 23d.

Who originated that most exquisite of inquisitions, the condolence system?

A solid blow has in itself the elements of its rebound; it arouses the antagonism of the life on which it falls; its relief is the relief of a combat.

But a hundred little needles pricking at us,—what is to be done with them? The hands hang down, the knees are feeble. We cannot so much as gasp, because they *are* little needles.

I know that there are those who like these calls; but why, in the name of all sweet pity, must we endure them without respect of persons, as we would endure a wedding reception or make a party-call?

Perhaps I write excitedly and hardly. I feel excited and hard.

I am sure I do not mean to be ungrateful for real sorrowful sympathy, however imperfectly it may be shown, or that near friends (if one has them), cannot give, in such a time as this, actual strength, even if they fail of comfort, by look and tone and love. But it is not near friends who are apt to wound, nor real sympathy which sharpens the worst of the needles. It is the fact that all your chance acquaintances feel called upon to bring their curious eyes and jarring words right into the silence of your first astonishment; taking you in a round of morning calls with kid gloves and parasol, and the liberty to turn your heart about and cut into it at pleasure. You may quiver at every touch, but there is no escape, because it is “the thing.”

For instance: Meta Tripp came in this afternoon,—I have refused myself to everybody but Mrs. Bland, before, but Meta caught me in the parlor, and there was no escape. She had come, it was plain enough, because she must, and she had come early, because, she too having lost a brother in the war, she was expected to be very sorry for me. Very likely she was, and very likely she did the best she knew how, but she was—not as uncomfortable as I, but as uncomfortable as she could be, and was evidently glad when it was over. She observed, as she went out, that I shouldn’t feel so sad by and by. She felt very sad at first when Jack died, but everybody got over that after a time. The girls were going to sew for the Fair next week at Mr. Quirk’s, and she hoped I would exert myself and come.

Ah, well:—

> “First learn to love one living man,
> Then mayst thou think upon the dead.”

It is not that the child is to be blamed for not knowing enough to stay away; but her coming here has made me wonder whether I am different from other women; why Roy was so much more to me than many brothers are to many sisters. I think it must be that there never *was* another like Roy. Then we have lived together so long, we two alone, since father died, that he had grown to me, heart of my heart, and life of my life. It did not seem as if he *could* be taken, and I be left.

Besides, I suppose most young women of my age have their dreams, and a future probable or possible, which makes the very incompleteness of life sweet, because of the symmetry which is waiting somewhere. But that was settled so long ago for me that it makes it very different. Roy was all there was.

February 26th.

Death and Heaven could not seem very different to a Pagan from what they seem to me.

I say this deliberately. It has been deliberately forced upon me. That of which I had a faint consciousness in the first shock takes shape now. I do not see how one with such thoughts in her heart as I have had can possibly be “regenerate,” or stand any chance of ever becoming “one of the redeemed.” And here I am, what I have been for six years, a member of an Evangelical church, in good and regular standing!

The bare, blank sense of physical repulsion from death, which was all the idea I had of anything when they first brought him home, has not gone yet. It is horrible. It was cruel. Roy, all I had in the wide world,—Roy, with the flash in

his eyes, with his smile that lighted the house all up; with his pretty, soft hair that I used to curl and kiss about my finger, his bounding step, his strong arms that folded me in and cared for me,—Roy snatched away in an instant by a dreadful God, and laid out there in the wet and snow,—in the hideous wet and snow,—never to kiss him, never to see him any more! * * * *

He was a good boy. Roy was a good boy. He must have gone to Heaven. But I know nothing about Heaven. It is very far off. In my best and happiest days, I never liked to think of it. If I were to go there, it could do me no good, for I should not see Roy. Or if by chance I should see him standing up among the grand, white angels, he would not be the old dear Roy. I should grow so tired of singing! Should long and fret for one little talk,—for I never said good by, and—

I will stop this.

A scrap from the German of Bürger, which I came across to-day, shall be copied here.

> “Be calm, my child, forget thy woe,
> And think of God and Heaven;
> Christ thy Redeemer hath to thee
> Himself for comfort given.
>
> “O mother, mother, what is Heaven?
> O mother, what is Hell?
> To be with Wilhelm,—that’s my Heaven;
> Without him,—that’s my Hell.”

February 27th.

Miss Meta Tripp, in the ignorance of her little silly heart, has done me a great mischief.

Phœbe prepared me for it, by observing, when she came up yesterday to dust my room, that “folks was all sayin’ that Mary Cabot”—(Homer is not an aristocratic town, and Phœbe doffs and dons my title at her own sweet will)—“that Mary Cabot was dreadful low sence Royal died, and hadn’t ought to stay shut up by herself, day in and day out. It was behaving con-trary to the will of Providence, and very bad for her health, too.” Moreover, Mrs. Bland, who called this morning with her three babies,—she never is able to stir out of the house without those children, poor thing!—lingered awkwardly on the door-steps as she went away, and hoped that Mary my dear wouldn’t take it unkindly, but she did wish that I would exert myself more to see my friends and receive comfort in my affliction. She didn’t want to interfere, or bother me, or—but—people would talk, and—

My good little minister’s wife broke down all in a blush, at this point in her “porochial duties” (I more than suspect that her husband had a hand in the matter), so I took pity on her embarrassment, and said smiling that I would think about it.

I see just how the leaven has spread. Miss Meta, a little overwhelmed and a good deal mystified by her call here, pronounces “poor Mary Cabot *so* sad; she wouldn’t talk about Royal; and you couldn’t persuade her to come to the Fair; and she was so *sober!*—why, it was dreadful!”

Therefore, Homer has made up its mind that I shall become resigned in an arithmetical manner, and comforted according to the Rule of Three.

I wish I could go away! I wish I could go away and creep into the ground and die! If nobody need ever speak any more words to me! If anybody only knew *what* to say!

Little Mrs. Bland has been very kind, and I thank her with all my heart. But she does not know. She does not understand. Her happy heart is bound up in her little live children. She never laid anybody away under the snow without a chance to say good by.

As for the minister, he came, of course, as it was proper that he should, before the funeral, and once after. He is a very good man, but I am afraid of him, and I am glad that he has not come again.

Night.

I can only repeat and re-echo what I wrote this noon. If anybody knew *what* to say!

Just after supper I heard the door-bell, and, looking out of the window, I caught a glimpse of Deacon Quirk's old drab felt hat, on the upper step. My heart sank, but there was no help for me. I waited for Phœbe to bring up his name, desperately listening to her heavy steps, and letting her knock three times before I answered. I confess to having taken my hair down twice, washed my hands to a most unnecessary extent, and been a long time brushing my dress; also to forgetting my handkerchief, and having to go back for it after I was down stairs. Deacon Quirk looked tired of waiting. I hope he was.

O, what an ill-natured thing to say! What is coming over me? What would Roy think? What could he?

"Good evening, Mary," said the Deacon, severely, when I went in. Probably he did not mean to speak severely, but

the truth is, I think he was a little vexed that I had kept him waiting. I said good evening, and apologized for my delay, and sat down as far from him as I conveniently could. There was an awful silence.

“I came in this evening,” said the Deacon, breaking it with a cough, “I came—hem!—to confer with you—”

I looked up. “I thought somebody had ought to come,” continued the Deacon, “to confer with you as a Christian brother on your spiritooal condition.”

I opened my eyes.

“To confer with you on your spiritooal condition,” repeated my visitor. “I understand that you have had some unfortoonate exercises of mind under your affliction, and I observed that you absented yourself from the Communion Table last Sunday.”

“I did.”

“Intentionally?”

“Intentionally.”

He seemed to expect me to say something more; and, seeing that there was no help for it, I answered.

“I did not feel fit to go. I should not have dared to go. God does not seem to me just now what He used to. He has dealt very bitterly with me. But, however wicked I may be, I will not mock Him. I think, Deacon Quirk, that I did right to stay away.”

“Well,” said the Deacon, twirling his hat with a puzzled look, “perhaps you did. But I don’t see the excuse for any such feelings as would make it necessary. I think it my duty to tell you, Mary, that I am sorry to see you in such a rebellious state of mind.”

I made no reply.

“Afflictions come from God,” he observed, looking at me as impressively as if he supposed that I had never heard the statement before. “Afflictions come from God, and, however afflictin’ or however crushin’ they may be, it is our duty to submit to them. Glory in triboolation, St. Paul says; glory in triboolation.”

I continued silent.

“I sympathize with you in this sad dispensation,” he proceeded. “Of course you was very fond of Royal; it’s natural you should be, quite natural—” He stopped, perplexed, I suppose, by something in my face. “Yes, it’s very natural; poor human nature sets a great deal by earthly props and affections. But it’s your duty, as a Christian and a church-member, to be resigned.”

I tapped the floor with my foot. I began to think that I could not bear much more.

“To be resigned, my dear young friend. To say ‘Abba, Father.’ and pray that the will of the Lord be done.”

“Deacon Quirk!” said I. “I am *not* resigned. I pray the dear Lord with all my heart to make me so, but I will not say that I am, until I am,—if ever that time comes. As for those words about the Lord’s will, I would no more take them on my lips than I would blasphemy, unless I could speak them honestly,—and that I cannot do. We had better talk of something else now, had we not?”

Deacon Quirk looked at me. It struck me that he would look very much so at a Mormon or a Hottentot, and I wondered whether he were going to excommunicate me on the spot.

As soon as he began to speak, however, I saw that he was only bewildered,—honestly bewildered, and honestly shocked: I do not doubt that I had said bewildering and shocking things.

“My friend,” he said solemnly, “I shall pray for you and leave you in the hands of God. Your brother, whom He has removed from this earthly life for His own wise—”

“We will not talk any more about Roy, if you please,” I interrupted; “*he* is happy and safe.”

“Hem!—I hope so,” he replied, moving uneasily in his chair; “I believe he never made a profession of religion, but there is no limit to the mercy of God. It is very unsafe for the young to think that they can rely on a death-bed repentance, but our God is a covenant-keeping God, and Royal’s mother was a pious woman. If you cannot say with certainty that he is numbered among the redeemed, you are justified, perhaps, in hoping so.”

I turned sharply on him, but words died on my lips. How could I tell the man of that short, dear letter that came to me in December,—that Roy’s was no death-bed repentance, but the quiet, natural growth of a life that had always been the life of the pure in heart; of his manly beliefs and unselfish motives; of that dawning sense of friendship with Christ of which he used to speak so modestly, dreading lest he should not be honest with himself? “Perhaps I ought not to call myself a Christian,” he wrote,—I learned the words by heart.—“and I shall make no profession to be such, till I am sure of it, but my life has not seemed to me for a long time to be my own. ‘Bought with a price’ just expresses it. I can point to no time at which I was conscious by any revolution

of feeling of ‘experiencing a change of heart,’ but it seems to me that a man’s heart might be changed for all that. I do not know that it is necessary for us to be able to watch every footprint of God. The *way* is all that concerns us,—to see that we follow it and Him. This I am sure of; and knocking about in this army life only convinces me of what I felt in a certain way before,—that it is the only way, and He the only guide *to* follow.”

But how could I say anything of this to Deacon Quirk?—this my sealed and sacred treasure, of all that Roy left me the dearest. At any rate I did not. It seemed both obstinate and cruel in him to come there and say what he had been saying. He might have known that I would not say that Roy had gone to Heaven, if—why, if there had been the breath of a doubt. It is a possibility of which I cannot rationally conceive, but I suppose that his name would never have passed my lips.

So I turned away from Deacon Quirk, and shut my mouth, and waited for him to finish. Whether the idea began to struggle into his mind that he *might* not have been making a very comforting remark, I cannot say; but he started very soon to go.

“Supposing you are right, and Royal was saved at the eleventh hour,” he said at parting, with one of his stolid efforts to be consolatory, that are worse than his rebukes, “if he is singing the song of Moses and the Lamb (he pointed with his big, dingy thumb at the ceiling), *he* doesn’t rebel against the doings of Providence. All *his* affections are subdued to God,—merged, as you might say,—merged in worshipping before the great White Throne. He doesn’t think

this miser’ble earthly spere of any importance, compared with that eternal and exceeding weight of glory. In the appropriate words of the poet,—

> ‘O, not to one created thing
> Shall our embrace be given,
> But all our joy shall be in God,
> For only God is Heaven.’

Those are very spiritooal and scripteral lines, and it’s very proper to reflect how true they are.”

I saw him go out, and came up here and locked myself in, and have been walking round and round the room. I must have walked a good while, for I feel as weak as a baby.

Can the man in any state of existence be made to comprehend that he has been holding me on the rack this whole evening?

Yet he came under a strict sense of duty, and in the kindness of all the heart he has! I know, or I ought to know, that he is a good man,—far better in the sight of God to-night, I do not doubt, than I am.

But it hurts,—it cuts,—that thing which he said as he went out; because I suppose it must be true; because it seems to me greater than I can bear to have it true.

Roy, away in that dreadful Heaven, can have no thought of me, cannot remember how I loved him, how he left me all alone. The singing and the worshipping must take up all his time. God wants it all. He is a “Jealous God.” I am nothing any more to Roy.

March 2.

And once I was much,—very much to him!

His Mamie, his poor Queen Mamie,—dearer, he used to say, than all the world to him,—I don’t see how he can like it so well up there as to forget her. Though Roy was a very good boy. But this poor, wicked little Mamie,—why, I fall to pitying her as if she were some one else, and wish that some one would cry over her a little. I can’t cry.

Roy used to say a thing,—I have not the words, but it was like this,—that one must be either very young or very ungenerous, if one could find time to pity one’s self.

I have lain for two nights, with my eyes open all night long. I thought that perhaps I might see him. I have been praying for a touch, a sign, only for something to break the silence into which he has gone. But there is no answer, none. The light burns blue, and I see at last that it is morning, and go down stairs alone, and so the day begins.

Something of Mrs. Browning’s has been keeping a dull mechanical time in my brain all day.

> “God keeps a niche
> In Heaven to hold our idols: ... albeit
> He brake them to our faces, and denied
> That our close kisses should impair their
> white.”

But why must He take them? And why should He keep them there? Shall we ever see them framed in their glorious gloom? Will He let us touch them *then*? Or must we stand like a poor worshipper at a Cathedral, looking up at his pictured saint afar off upon the other side?

Has everything stopped just here? Our talks together in the twilight, our planning and hoping and dreaming