The Door

Elia Wilkinson Peattie

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Chapter 1

"HE'S asleep, isn't he?" asks the man.

"I can't be sure. I never could be sure! With his eyes always closed as they are, and with that odd habit he has of lying so still, I can't make out half the time whether he's sleeping or waking."

"You haven't told him anything yet, I suppose?"

"Told him? No. Oh, no, I haven't told him!"

The woman shivers perceptibly, and draws closer to the leaping fire on the hearth.

"Of course," continues the man, speaking cautiously still, "you may as well explain the situation to him. He's too young to take it to heart, and I know you agree with me that it's going to be the best thing for him in the end. Those childless people, shut in as they are, will be perfectly devoted to the child. His misfortune is going to be a direct appeal to their sympathies. He'll be the great factor of their lives you know that, Madeline? While in our lives he would be but an incident, and a disturbing one at that. It isn't that I dislike the little fellow. He couldn't help being born, and he couldn't help being blind. He couldn't help having Alexander Cameron for his father. But I can help having him in my home, Madeline, to remind me of things I want to forget. You understand, don't you? I'm a jealous man. I was made that way. I'd give ten years of my life to have had you fresh from your mother's arms to make you see me and no one else; to live in your heart and in your mind alone. The sight of the boy would be a perpetual irritation. I couldn't endure it, Madeline. It would make a sort of monster out of me!"

He leans forward to draw her into his arms, but she evades him and steals to the door of an inner room.

"Donald! Donald!" she calls softly.

There is no movement in the little bed by the wall. A child's slight form is visible there, well−covered with its blue quilt. The light catches his reddish−gold curls and displays a portion of a delicate profile.

The woman comes back to the fire.

"It's wonderful," she says moodily, "how like and unlike his father he is!"

The man's large jowl gives a grotesque movement as if his teeth ground hard upon each other.

"But how am I to help all that?" cries the woman, spreading out her hands. "There's no use, Henry, in denying my past! We can't have things as we want them in this world. We have to take them as we find them. That's the sensible way!"

The man comes close to her.

"But I tell you," he cries, "that I am going to make you forget it! The thought of you fills my heart, and I mean to make you forget everything except the present. And that's to be made up of love! Can't you feel as I do, Madeline, that there's nothing else in the world but that? Why, it's the beginning and end of my days. The thought wakes up with me, walks with me, breathes with me, sleeps with me!"

The face of the woman flushes deeply. She leans forward till the laces droop from her white throat, on which the man fixes his eyes greedily.

"Well," she whispers, "I think I ought to be forgiven if I go looking for happiness for a while! If people knew the whole truth, they'd forgive me, Henry, wouldn't they?"

"People do as they please, Madeline! They take joy when they can get it. Do you suppose any other man would have waited as I have; you've been free four years. I've known for one year, and I've loved you from the moment my eyes fell on you. It never occurred to me then that you were anything but a girl! I tell you, Madeline, I'll never forget the torture of that discovery the discovery that you were a widow and that Donald "

"Oh, Donald!" There is poignancy in the cry. "If it were not for Donald "

"Now that's foolish, Madeline! Consider a moment. The boy is a tyrant in his way "

"He's so helpless! That's why, Henry so helpless."

"Well, he's been encouraged to be helpless. And he's a petulant, ungrateful little fellow. In the life we will probably lead it would be out of the question for you to give him personal care. He'd have to be turned over to servants; and it's a thousand times better for him, as you can see, to go to the Brandenbergs out there at the farm. But, to be perfectly frank, whether it's better for him or not, it's got to be, Madeline. If the boy's with you he'll be first sooner or later he'll be first. And then I'll hate him."

"It comes to this," says the woman, "that I choose between you?"

The man shows no capitulation. His eyes are glowing, his lips parted, and the strong pulse shows in his throat.

"Precisely," he nods.

"Oh!" breathes the woman staring at him.

"Well," he expostulates. "Be reasonable, Madeline! Haven't I seen you look at the boy with positive aversion? More than once, in my presence, you've drawn away from him involuntarily when he came putting his arms about your neck."

"It was in your presence!" she murmurs with a subtle insinuation. But he does not observe that, and urges his point.

"He's the picture of his father! That's the core of the matter. You shrank from the father, and you shrink from the son. The chances are, as he grows older, the resemblance will become more marked and your repugnance will

increase. Nervous, irritable, with a sort of disease of pride don't you recognize the traits you have told me of in your in your husband?"

The woman twists her fingers in and out. There is a silence, and the two have the effect of combating each other with their thoughts. There is at once a repulsion and an attraction between them, and when by chance their eyes meet, they hold each other with a look at once ecstatic and apprehensive.

At last the silence is broken. It is the woman who speaks.

"I began wrong!" she cries. "I began wrong! Maybe I'm destined to go wrong to the end!"

"You are right for me," Stonehurst interrupts. "You are perfect for me."

But Madeline does not heed him.

"My childhood was pitiable," she says, as much to herself as to her companion. "It was worse it was grotesque. I had extravagant dreams, and I was surrounded with the ugliest realities. There was the boarding−house that poor mother kept, and where she worked like a slave. The kitchen was dark and had a moldy smell, and there were rats in the pantries. She had brother John and Aunt Ann and me, all to feed and clothe. She thought for us all, and hung over that old burned−out range, with the cross−bars sagging in the middle. Her face got as hard as granite, and her eyes lovely eyes got dim. I was full of fine dreams, and always trying to pretend that things were beautiful and that we were happy. I had a great deal of belief in myself. I was always going to do something wonderful. But after all, I couldn't get ahead of the mere work of the house, and my dreams boiled in me! Nothing could have been more ridiculous than I was a great gangling girl all choked up with grief and pride and revolt and passion and love and pity and hate!"

"Poor child!" murmurs Stonehurst.

"I am trying to excuse myself to you," she explains, drawing nearer. "Donald's sleeping now. Can't you hear his breathing? We needn't be so cautious in what we are saying. Oh, that's one of the things that has always annoyed me so in him his habit of listening! I suppose that, as he couldn't use his eyes, all the inquisitiveness of childhood has gone into his ears." She sits staring at the fire for a moment or two while the man looks at her.

"You never have told me," he says under his breath, "how it came about that you married Alexander Cameron."

The woman clings to him with her look, her face scarlet with a curious shame.

"But I feel," she cries, "as if it were a dream! When you are here with me it seems as if I must sweep the facts away and cry out 'But I never belonged to any one but you but you, Henry!' Why, it's as if I had always held a vision of you in my heart and as if you had come now to fulfil it in the flesh!"

The man slips from his chair upon his knees and presses her hands to his lips. They are silent for a time, and only his deep breathing is audible. Then he arises.

"After all," he says with a smile which strangely illuminates his somber face. "Facts are of little consequence compared with our inner knowledge. Tell me I must know some time tell me about Cameron."

Suddenly she laughs, and there is a witchery in her glance.

"Silence is a little glass ball!" she cries. "There is nothing durable about it. Sooner or later it has to be broken." She makes as though she ground something between her glowing palms. "See, I shatter it now! Stir the fire,

Henry. Thank you. Well well he boarded with my mother, don't you see, whenever he stopped in the village on his way to town to sell his fruit or stock or wheat. He he saw me. I always waited on the table. He brought me presents from the farm, and took me riding now and then. I thought he was kind, and I was glad he did not talk. I liked my own thoughts better than anything he could say. One day he drove mother and me out to his farm Cameron Meadows, it is called. We went in May when everything was in blossom. I felt like singing or shouting, and I couldn't see how he and mother could speak so low. We saw his woods and orchards, his pasture lands and hay fields, his wheat lands and his garden places. He showed us his sheep, his cattle, his horses, his very hogs and chickens. There were order and plenty everywhere. And in the midst of a hundred beeches stood the old house. His grandfather built it, you know. It is a beautiful house, Henry seven windows in the upper part, looking from the trees with a wise expression; and below, flanked with windows to the left and right, the great door."

She pauses for a moment and lifts her hand with a curious gesture.

"I shall never forget what an impression that door made on me when I looked at it first!"

"And why, Madeline?"

"Oh, it was such a benignant door! You may laugh, but actually, if it had not been for the door, I believe I should never have consented to be mistress of Cameron Meadows at all! It was a single door, but wide, with good brass hinges and cross bands and locks. Above it was a fan light, with delicate yellowing old lace plaited in it. It was as we were about to enter the door that Mr. Cameron said to me: 'I want you to cross this threshold as my promised wife.' At first I was astonished and afraid. I hardly had been thinking of him at all. I had been wishing I had a companion that beautiful day while mother and Mr. Cameron talked together. I stood for a moment saying nothing, and thoughts went racing through my head as memories do through the brain of a drowning man. And then I happened to look up at the door everything swimming before me and a curious idea came to me. The old door looked so rich in experience, and seemed so fitted to watch the generations of men and women come and go that I fell into step, so to speak. I thought of the brides that had crossed that threshold, and something irresistible compelled me to make myself one of them. And I said 'yes.' At least, they say I said yes. I know Mr. Cameron drew me into the house looking more pleased than I had supposed he knew how to look; but I could hardly see him for a strange vision that I had of the people who had finished with their lives and been carried out of that door! Actually I seemed to see a procession there with the long black box−like thing with its fringed pall! But I was not afraid. It was majestic the vision I fancied how I would be carried out of there, too, and I liked even that thought. I liked anything that was not poverty−stricken and semi−vagrant and mean! Mother was there all the time smiling at me in that curious patient way of hers. I had never before noticed how terribly thin she looked. Perhaps it was partly her trailing black dress, or the little bonnet on her white hair but anyway, she seemed to be appealing to me to save her from drudgery in her pathetic old age. I put out my hands to her, and it was she not Mr. Cameron into whose arms I fell. And I wept there a long, long time."

Stonehurst gnaws his lip and says nothing.

"We were married in a month. I took mother home with me, and Aunt Ann was boarded at a farmer's near by and brother John sent away to school. Mr. Cameron did everything as he had agreed. And then mother mother died. She was tired out, and when she felt we no longer needed her, she gave up the will to live. And the old door had seen a new processional and another recessional, as I had seen in my vision that first day. Then I settled down to my life. There were the workpeople to see to; and there were Mr. Cameron's friends to entertain; and there were church duties and visits to make. Everything was laid out for me. Every day was filled up with things I ought to do. I was so busy that even my dreams were crowded out."

"No, no! Your dreams are the most substantial part of you, Madeline. That's what is so marvelous about you. There they are always, so familiar and immemorial! You say they are your dreams, but I believe they are mine!

Or they are everybody's! You got them out of the heart of the ages, or you stole them from poets! You can't say things as others do. There is something so moving in your voice! I've always felt you to be a mystery! That's why I adore you so! I wonder if you know how everything you say moves me?"

"I'm a mystery, maybe, because I have never found myself. I live in a hermit land, and there is only me to wander about in it."

"Have I not entered it, Madeline, Madeline?"

The woman laughs sadly.

"Have you? Sometimes I think you have, and other times I think I have only found your footprints on the sand and that I am searching for you! But then real things have always seemed like shadows and shadows like realities to me. There at Cameron Meadows, the work, the house, the people, were like moving shapes. The summer passed and a white winter came. I had hoped we might go to the city for a while, but Mr. Cameron thought I ought to be very quiet then. No one visited us except the farm neighbors. Mr. Cameron bought my books for me they were his choice. It used to get dark at four o'clock, and there were interminable twilights, with the clock ticking on the stairs. After that came the almost silent dinners and then the long evenings with Mr. Cameron at his accounts. Sometimes I laughed out loud and made Mr. Cameron wonder if I were mad. I used to go out and rush through the woods. I used to beat the tree trunks with my bare fists. At last I grew torpid. I was surprised when the Sundays came around. And then then Donald came. That was a fearful experience, but I wouldn't have missed it. I was interested at last it was suffering with some significance to it. I remember three horrible days passed and I was sunk in strange visions. I must have suffered physically almost to the limit of endurance. But it isn't that I remember it is the visions. They were of battlefields and the dying; I heard the cries of the thirsting and wounded, and the sobs of men who were homesick. I was on the sea tossing in the storm with men who were not afraid to die. I went to the guillotine through streets of people who hated me, and I wept with pity for them. Then, when it was all over, something had happened to Donald some paralysis. He was blind!"

The man gives an inarticulate exclamation, at once pitying and repugnant.

"We were dismayed, his father and I." Stonehurst flinches from the intimacy of the reference. "We sent to surgeons far and wide. We carried the child here and there. We did everything but let him be tortured. We stood guard against that. But in the end nothing was done. We had to give up hope."

The woman's tone deepens and the recital gathers in passion.

"So life grew more and more hateful, you understand. The child was peevish, and for two years I didn't know what it was to have a night's rest. Mr. Cameron slept in a distant part of the house that he might not hear the baby cry. He couldn't endure that. 'Can't you stop that crying?' he would say to me. 'Can't you find out what is the matter with that child?' He would walk the floor and wring his hands or plunge out of doors."

She drags her fingers down her cheeks, leaving marks upon the flesh, which make her seem almost gaunt.

"Between the child that could not see and that cried day and night, and the man in a frenzy or irritability, I grew to hate life! It was like being on the rack. I used, often and often, to wish that we were all dead."

Stonehurst starts to speak, but she interrupts him.

"Then Mr. Cameron died. I think he was broken−hearted about Donald. And after that I spent three years doing my duty. Three interminable years I lived in solitude, looking after the dairy and the farm, and nursing Donald. And all the time I was struggling to get hold of an idea about the rights of an individual to select and take for

himself. So one day it came to me that the old door stood open the door of the house that had welcomed me, that had imprisoned me and that was going to liberate me. It had seen my poor child groping through it on his hands and knees, then stumbling through in his first steps, and falling falling so often! It had seen the master carried forth. And I meant that it should see me go out in search of my life. My life was there outside, somewhere, awaiting me. The door stood wide it seemed to give me permission to go."

She turns to the man with one of her swift smiles.

"And so I found my life," she whispers and holds out her hands.

The room has in it for a time an enchanting silence. The October wind stirs without in an air rich with perfumes of decay; the soft breathing of the child is faintly audible; and the coals fall now and then in the glowing bed on the hearth. Suddenly the child cries in his sleep, and Madeline starts to her feet guiltily. She hastens to the bedroom, and Stonehurst hears her soothing her boy with inarticulate sounds and soft pattings. When she comes back she stands by the fire, and Stonehurst, arising, looks across the hearth at her.

"He isn't so well these days," she says, using the pronoun as mothers will. I've had such happiness in these rooms, but Donald has never found his way about and so he hasn't liked it. He is shut up too much, and it's the most difficult thing imaginable to find a toy that will amuse him. He enjoys himself best at the farm."

"That's the place for him," agrees Stonehurst. "He'll have pets in plenty and the right sort of food and exercise. These Brandenbergs, from what you tell me, will be devoted to him. You said they were mother and son? The son is a grown man, I suppose."

"Yes."

"He's looking after your interests for you, isn't he?"

"Carl Brandenberg? Yes. He understands the place perfectly."

"Well, don't place too much confidence in him. Remember it's a large property you have."

"Carl Brandenberg cheats nobody and never me."

"No? But why not you particularly?"

"His father before him managed for the Camerons. He inherits loyalty."

"Do you wish me to inquire into the conditions of his adoption of Donald? For he would wish to have the adoption according to law, I suppose."

"Need we think about that just yet?"

"Why, yes. We are to be married next month the twelfth "

"The fifteenth, if you please."

"The fifteenth! Aren't you moving the days along? No? Well, the fifteenth. We shall start for France at once. It is obvious that everything must be settled before we go. These people will, I have no doubt, send you frequent communications about "

"I don't want them! I don't want them! Understand that clearly, when Donald goes out of my life he goes out utterly."

The man sighs as if with relief.

"Well, that's sensible. I like your resolution. It's better for both of you to drop the relationship. When is the boy to be taken out there?"

Madeline is regarding him as if she had never seen him before. Glancing at her, he draws back almost with apprehension. Then a joyful flush suffuses her face and neck. She gives a cry and leans toward him, soliciting him with the glory of her eyes, the lusciousness of her lips. He can not profane the moment with words, but after a time she volunteers:

"To−morrow I shall take Donald to the farm. The Brandenbergs are impatient for him. There is a teacher they wish to engage for him who is awaiting my decision."

"You're not going to change your mind, Madeline? I have a curious feeling about you. You are so inexpressibly illusive."

She does not heed what he is saying. She seizes his arms in her grasp.

"I can't lose you," she cries. "Having known you, love, I can't lose you! Ah, I can't! I can't!"

But presently she is impatient for his departure and interrupts his half−playful reassurances.

"You must go you must go! I am inflexible about the hour, you know! And it has come. How I admire my prudence!"

"But if you go to the country to−morrow, shall you be able to return? Am I to spend the evening with you as usual?"

"How else? Good night, good night."

"My love, your impetuosity is too much for me. At least let me find my possessions. There my hat thank you. Good night, Madeline. Sleep very sweetly and don't change that date again."

"I protest I never changed it."

"I say you must have done so. Stick fast to your resolution about the boy. It's best; believe me, it's best. You'll rejoice a year from now and so will he that it was done. Good night, my dear."

He is willing to go, but she is possessed with a sorrowful passion. She holds him, appealing with her eyes for that intoxicating gaze of his. Suddenly she pushes him from her, drives him with tempestuous laughter from the room, catches his fingers at the last and lifts them to her lips, then puts the door between them. He hears the bolt shoot, hears something sounding like a sob, pauses to rap softly, begging a second's more delirious pain of parting; is answered with silence, and, touching the bell, summons the drowsing elevator boy.

Chapter 2

A beech wood in October. Beyond, down a sheer bluff, West Water, with the sun low. In the midst of the wood an

old house, and walking slowly toward it a woman leading a blind child by the hand. The soft pelt of the gold−bright leaves makes only the faintest sound.

"Donald, the place looks as if it were enchanted! It is gold everywhere the beeches, the water, the very air, are gold. Take off your hat, my son. Mother wants to see your golden head fit into the picture."

"It's hard walking through these leaves, isn't it, mother? They're up to my knees."

"I never saw them lie so thick. You're tired, no doubt. Shall we sit down and rest? Sink right down on the leaves lie back in them. Isn't that good? It's a mile through the orchard and along the drive, and you've been up since early morning and not had half enough to eat! We ran away home, didn't we?"

"Yes. What a queer thing it was to do! What made you do that, mother?"

"I was afraid of something."

"Were you? If you had told me I'd have comforted you."

"You do comfort me just as much as if I'd told you."

"Oh, do I? May I put flowers in your lap? There is a sweet smell to your dress like flowers. And I like you to pat my face like that. Your hands aren't any larger than mine not so large!"

"Isn't it still? There's not a soul in the house! You ought to see how peaceful it looks. The windows are gold those toward the northwest. From where I sit, Donald, I can see the door!"

"Can you? We'll unlock it in a minute, mother."

"It looks as kind as ever."

"What fun it will be to open it!"

"Yes. And when it is opened this time, I swear it shall never be locked again. Not while we live, Donald. Some one shall be there to answer if any one knocks. In your father's time, and your grand−father's, and your great−grandfather's, it was never locked against any one who came. Great men and beggars came to it, and none of them was turned away."

"I never fall when I go in and out of that door. It's the best old door in the world!"

"Yes, it is. Do you know, I'm going to have teachers come to help you grow up a wise, good man."

"But then I'm blind. I can't do the way other boys do."

"Perhaps you'll do better than others. You will own miles of good land meadows, pastures, wheatland, orchards, forests. You will have cattle and sheep, horses and fowls. It will take a good man and one who knows a great deal to look after these things. I shall have you taught many things. Besides, you shall have a great deal of pleasure. I have been thinking all day of ways in which you and I were to have pleasure together."

"Mother, I never knew you to be the way you are to−day!"

"Am I different?"

"Yes oh, yes. I love you, mother."

"Do you, Donald? Do you, indeed?"

"If you were always like this, I'd never be cross the way I have been."

"I am going to be with you always like this, my son."

The gold grows delicate in the west. The glimmerings of the sun path fade away. The boy sleeps lightly for a few moments, while the woman fixes her eyes upon the door, which seems to invite her to enter. She reaches out her arms as she might to her mother. The tears fall on her cheeks. She seems to make silent confession to the door. Of all she thinks, but one sentence finds utterance:

"I have been bereft of almost everything, but now I have found that worth all I lost!" The soft gloom grows. The water becomes shadowy. Mystery is abroad in the woods. The woman rouses the boy with a kiss.

"It is growing dark," she says. "We must go in."

The boy laughs. He does not mind the darkness. He makes his way up through the leaves to the steps, climbs them gaily and puts his hand on the knob.

"It is locked," says his mother, "and the leaves are thick all about the threshold." The boy still laughs. She gives him the key and he puts it in the great lock. The wide door swings open with a friendly sound. The boy makes his way swiftly through the rooms, touching everything with eager hands. His laughter comes out softly, like spring water from the earth. The woman gropes about in the gloom, searching for a light. After a time a lamp is burning. Madeline throws open the windows to admit the mellow air. The darkness has deepened and wraps the old house about like a cloak.

"How curious!" she cries. "We have orchards and bees and cattle, and not a mouthful that we may eat or drink!"

But as she speaks there is a knocking at the door, then a hearty voice crying:

"Welcome! Welcome! What a surprise!"

Madeline stops in the middle of the floor and stares at the farmerlike, capable figure which confronts her. Her face is flushed, her eyes shy like those of a child who has done wrong and is now determined to be good.

"It's Carl!" cries the boy. "It's that Carl Brandenberg."

He gathers the blind boy in his arms and hugs him with rough tenderness. He runs his hands through the boy's hair and pulls at his ears.

"Wasn't your home−coming very sudden?" he asks.

"Nothing could have been more sudden," says the woman, half−defensively. "And we are alone and we've no food."

The man mocks them: "The Camerons of Cameron Meadow starving! The bins empty, the cupboards bare!"

He waves his hand and is gone.

"He will bring us our supper," says the boy, nodding his head sagely. Madeline begins tidying the house. She spreads the table and lays places for three.

"We must have fresh water," she declares, and runs into the darkness. The boy throws himself in his chair by the window and rocks back and forth contentedly. He can hear the lake muttering its ancient tale below the cliff; hear the fall of the leaves; hear the soft wild noises of birds. Then, after a time, a mingling of voices in the darkness. He knows that his mother and the farmer are bringing in the water cold from the well, the milk warm from the cow, the bread, the honey and the fruit. A sweet home−consciousness steals over him, and a breeze, rich with odors of the wood and the night, reaches him from the open door.