

# Over the Gateway

By R. H. Benson

We were sitting together one morning in the common sitting-room in the centre of the house. There had been a fall during the night, and it was thought that the old man should not sit in the garden until the sun had dried the earth—we sat indoors instead, but with the great door wide open, that looked on to a rectangle of lawn that lay before the house. Once a drive had led to this door through a gate with pedestals and stone balls, that stood exactly opposite, about yards away, but the drive had long been grassed over; although even now it showed faintly under two slight ridges in the grass that ran from the gate to the door. Otherwise the lawn was enclosed by a low old brick wall, almost hidden by a wealth of ivy, against which showed in rich masses of colour the heads of purple and yellow irises and tawny wallflowers.

The old man had been silent at breakfast. He had offered the Holy Sacrifice as usual that morning in the little chapel upstairs, and I had noticed at the time even that he seemed pre-occupied: and at breakfast he had talked very little, letting every subject drop as I suggested it; and I had understood at last that his thoughts were far away in the past; and I did not wish to trouble him.

We were sitting in two tall carved chairs at the doorway, his feet were wrapped in a rug, and his eyes were looking steadily and mournfully out across towards the ironwork gate in the wall. Tall grasses of the patch of uncut meadow outside leaned against it or pushed their feathery heads through it; and I saw presently that the priest was looking at the gate, letting his eyes rove over every detail of climbing plant, iron-work and the old brickwork—and not, as I had at first thought, merely gazing into the dim distances of the years behind him.

Suddenly he broke the long silence.

“Did I ever tell you,” he asked, “about what I saw out there in the garden? It looks ordinary enough now: yet I saw there what I suppose I shall never see again on this side of death, or at least not until I am in very gate of death itself.”

I too looked out at the gate. The atmosphere was full of that “clear shining after rain” of which King David sang—it was air made visible and radiant by the union and water, those two most joyous creatures of God. A great chestnut tree blotted out all beyond the gate.

“Tell me if you can,” I said. “You how I love to hear those stories.”

“Years ago, as perhaps you know, not long after my ordination I was working in London. My father lived here then, as his father before him. That coat of arms in the centre of that iron gate was put up by him soon after he succeeded to the property. I used to come down here now and then for a breath of country air. I hardly remember any pleasure so keen as the pleasure of coming into this glorious country air out of the smoke and noise of London—or of lying awake at night with the rustle of the pines outside my window instead of the ceaseless human tumult of the town.

“Well, I came down here once, suddenly, on a summer evening, bearing heavy news. I need not go into details; it would be useless to do that—but it will be enough to say that the news did not personally affect me or my family. It was a curious series of circumstances that led me to be the bearer of such news at all—but it was to a lady who happened by the merest chance to be staying with my family. I scarcely knew her at all—in fact I had only seen her once before. The

news had come to my ears in London, and I had heard that the one whom it most concerned did not know it—that they dared not write or telegraph. I volunteered, of course, to take the news

“It was with a very heavy heart that I walked up from the station—the road seemed intolerably short. I may say that I knew that the news would be heart-breaking to her who had to hear it, I came in by gate at the end of the avenue” (he waved his hand round to the right) “and passed right down to the back of the house behind us. This door at which we are sitting had been the front door, but the drive had just been turfed over, and we used the door at the back instead, and this lawn here was very much as you see it now, only the drive still showed plainly like a long narrow grave across grass.

“As I came in through the door at the back, she was coming out, with a book and a basket-chair to sit in the garden. My heart gave a terrible throb of pain—for I knew that by the time my business was done there would be no thought of a quiet evening in the garden, and that look of serene happiness would be wiped out of her face—and all through what I had to say. For a moment she did not recognise me in the dark entry and stood back as I came in, and then—

“ ‘Why it is you,’ she said; ‘you have come home. I did not know you were expected.’

“I breathed a moment steadily to recover myself.

“ ‘I was not expected,’ I said; and then, after a moment: ‘May I speak to you?’

“ ‘Speak to me? Why, certainly. In the garden or here?’

“ ‘In here,’ I answered, and went past her and pushed open the door into this room.

‘She came past me, and stood here by the door still holding the book, with her finger between the leaves.

“Now you are wondering, I expect, why I did not get some other woman to break the news to her. Well, I had debated that ever since I had volunteered to be the bearer of these tidings: and partly because I was afraid of being cowardly—call it pride if you will—and partly for other reasons which I need not mention, I felt I was bound to fulfil my promise literally. It might be, I thought, too, that she would prefer the news to be known by as few people as possible. At least, whether I judged rightly or wrongly, here was my task before me.

“She stood there,” the old man went on, pointing to the doorpost or the right, “and I here,” and he pointed a yard further back, “and the door was wide open as it is now, and the fragrant evening air poured past us into the room. Her face would be partly in shadow; but in her eyes there was just a dawning wonder at my abruptness, with perhaps the faintest tinge of anxiety, but no more.

“ ‘I have come,’ I said slowly, looking out into the garden, ‘on a very hard errand.’ I could not go on. I turned and looked at her. Ah! the anxiety had deepened a little. ‘And—and it concerns you and your happiness.’ I looked again, and I remember how her face had changed. Her lips were a little open, and her eyes shone wide open, half in shadow and half in light, and there were new and terrible little lines on her forehead. And then I told her.

“It was done in a sentence or two, and when I looked again her lips had closed and her hand had clenched itself into the moulding of the doorpost. I can see her rings now blazing in the light that poured over the chestnut tree (it was lower then) into the room. Then her lips moved once or twice—her hand unclenched itself hesitatingly—and she went steadily across the room. There was a great sofa there then, and when she reached it she threw herself face downwards across the arm and back.

And I waited at the doorway, looking out at the iron gate. Sorrow was new to me then. I had not learnt to understand it then, or to be quiet under it. And as I looked I knew only that there was a terrible struggle going on in the room behind. There in front of me was a garden full of

peace and sweetness and the soft glow of sunset light; and there behind me was something very like hell—and I stood between the living and the dead.

“Then I remembered that I was a priest, and ought to be able to say something—just a word of the Divine message that the Saviour brought—but I could not. I felt I was in deep waters. Even God seemed far away, intolerably serene and aloof; and I longed with all my power for a human person to pray and to bear a little of that strife behind me, from which I felt separated by so wide a gulf. And then God gave me the clear vision again.

“You see the iron gate,” the old man went on, pointing. “Well, right between those posts, but a little above them, outlined clearly against the chestnut tree, beyond, was the figure of a man.

“Now I do not know how to explain myself, but I was conscious that across this material world of light and colour there cut a plane of the spiritual world, and that where the planes crossed I could look through and see what was beyond. It was like smoke cutting across a sunbeam. Each made the other visible.

“Well, this figure of a man, then, was kneeling in the air, that is the only way I can describe it—his face was turned towards me, but upwards. Now the most curious thing that struck me at the time was that he was, as it were, leaning at a sharp angle to one side; but it did not appear to be grotesque. Instead the world seemed tilted; the chestnut tree was out of the perpendicular, the wall out of the horizontal. The true level was that of the man.

“I know this sounds foolish, but it showed me how the world of spirits was the real world, and the world of sense comparatively unreal, just as the sorrow of the woman behind me was more real than the beams overhead.

“And again, compared with the kneeling figure, the chestnut tree and the gate seemed unsubstantial and shadowy. I know that men who see visions tell us that it is usually the other way. All I can say is that it was not so with me. This figure was kneeling, as I have said; his robe streamed away behind him—a great cloak—drawn tightly back from the shoulders, as if he were battling with a strong wind—the Wind of Grace, I suppose, that always blows from the throne. His arms were stretched out in front of him, but opened sufficiently to let me see his face; and his face will be with me till I die, and please God afterwards. It was beardless, and bore the unmistakable character of a priest’s face.

“Now you know how close the intensest pain and the intensest joy lie together. Their lines so nearly meet. In this man’s face they did meet. Anguish and ecstasy were one. His eyes were open, his lips parted. I could not tell whether he was old or young. His face was ageless, as the faces of all are who look upon Him who inhabits eternity. He was praying. I can say no more than that. He had opened his heart to this woman’s sorrow. He had made it his own: and it met there, in petition if you wish to call it so, or in resignation if you prefer that name for it, or in adoration—you may call it what you will—all that is true, but each is inadequate—but that sorrow met there with his own purified will, which itself had become one with the eternal will of God. I tell you I know it.

“I looked at him, and in my ears was a sobbing from the room behind; but as I looked the glory of anguish deepened on his face and the sobbing behind me slackened and ceased, and I heard a whispering and the name of God and of His Son, and then the sight before me had passed; and there stood the chestnut tree again as real and as beautiful as before; and when I turned the woman was standing up, and the light of conquest was in her eyes.

She held out her hand to me, and I stooped and kissed it, but I dared not take it in my own, for she had been in heavenly places. I had seen her sorrow carried and laid before the throne of God by one greater than either of us, and something of his glory rested upon her.”

The old man's voice ceased. When I turned to look at him he was looking steadily again at the iron gate in the wall, and his eyes were shining like the radiant air outside. "I do not know," he said in a moment, "whether she is alive or dead, but I offered Holy Sacrifice this morning for her peace in either state."