

# A Closed Door

By M. E. Bramston

The reading-room of the Coverley Town Institute was regarded with some dislike by the ladies of the neighbourhood, because it was so attractive to their husbands, and (they said) robbed them of so many of the spare hours that might otherwise have been spent in the society of their lords. And perhaps this was true. It may have been that the masculine mind liked being now and then relieved of the necessity it felt of posing on a universal authority before its feminine admirers, and fell to discussing matters of debate with a quite refreshing implication that there were certain things in the world on which it had not made up its mind: or how else should the following conversation have taken place between the Doctor—an elderly man who had retired from active practice—and the Vicar, who was under forty? We may be quite sure that they would have been far less frank in the company of old Mrs. Doctor and young Mrs. Vicar.

“So poor old Miss Brook has gone,” said the Doctor. “Queer woman, but a great deal of good about her, in spite of her delusions.”

“A great deal of good! I should think so,” said the Vicar. “She was not over gracious to her equals, but the kindness she would show to the tramp and the outcast woman was beyond all telling. She was cheated again and again, but it never seemed to make any difference to her. By the bye, I never could find out what her delusions were. Was she a spiritualist, or what did she hold unlike other people?”

“I can tell you that,” said the Doctor, “for she and I have had various talks over her fancies in past years, and it seems that she wrote out her own story and left orders that it should be sent to me after her death. I got it yesterday, and I have read it through with great interest. There are no conditions about secrecy, but I don’t want the ladies to get hold of the story and gossip over it. If you like to look at it you may, and then you can tell me what you think of it. Of course it is the medical interest in it that is most fetching to me—it is thoroughly interesting to see delusions described at first hand.”

“Well,” said the Vicar, “when I have read it, you shall explain to me as much of the medical point of view as the lay mind can understand.”

“And you shall do the same with the clerical, Vicar!” And they parted, the Doctor chuckling, the Vicar smiling genially.

The MS. which the Doctor sent the Vicar was written in a peculiar handwriting—the pointed “Italian hand” of generations ago, but upright instead of slanting. It was very clear and neat, and the papers were tied together with narrow green ribbon. They were accurately paged, and every error had been carefully erased with a penknife, the paper polished smooth, and the word re-written. Evidently the author had spent much pains upon the production of her MS.—in fact, even more than a budding author is wont to do before he sends his first work to his first publisher.

It was entitled *The History of my Life*, and ran as follows

“Before I, who am the last of the Brooks of Brook, depart from this world, it seems to me fitting that I should relate, for the sake of others, the sin which I sinned, and the penance which I suffered. Therefore I have written out the history of my life that others may be warned that in

yielding to the passion of hatred they may be dividing themselves from the love that is still poured on them from those behind the veil—as I did.

“We Brooks have always been known for our fierce tempers and our implacable hatreds. I suppose that, from within the memory of man, until the time of my great sin, there has never been a time when every Brook was on speaking terms with every other. Sometimes they have had reasons for this—sometimes none. My grandfather and his brother did not speak for years before they died, because of a quarrel about a racehorse at Doncaster. I do not think we ever came within the arm of the law; we Brooks were always respectable, and I fancy most of us thought it right to say we forgave our enemies on our deathbeds, though I doubt if any of us ever proved it by altering our wills.

“When I was young, there were five alive, and settled close by, of the earlier generation of Brooks. My father was Brook of Brook; my uncle George had married Kate Farrar of Greythorpe, who inherited the place and lived there; and my three Brook aunts lived in the village. One visited the poor; one hunted; and the youngest curled her hair and gave herself the airs of youth, and the others called her ‘Selina, child,’ when she was past forty. They were never all on speaking terms at once, and seldom all appeared at meals together. But this did not mean more than that they had some little tiff going on: perhaps the wind was in the east, or the jam had fermented, or the cat kitted in the wardrobe. They had not much, however, to do with my bringing-up, for, though my mother died when I was a child, my father and my aunt Thomasina quarrelled because she said he had not enough mourning coaches at the funeral, after which they did not speak for six months. The only woman of my own rank who mothered me was my aunt at Greythorpe, and my only companions were my cousins there.

“My cousin George was heir to Greythorpe, and my father and uncle made up their minds when we were children that he and I were to marry so that he should still be Brook of Brook; for the Farrars had not been at Greythorpe more than thirty years, and we had been at Brook for four hundred. I was a strong girl, tall and active, and comely, though not a beauty at my best; and George and I were good comrades in our childhood. I could climb trees as well as he, and throw stones as far, and never feared anything: whereas his sisters Molly and Kitty were tender, weak, timid things, afraid of cows and toads, and loving their needles and their ribbons and their warm seat by the fire. Then he went away to school and college, and when he was twenty and I eighteen, we were engaged to one another, and I loved him with the full love of an ardent foolish child, who knows nothing of the world; and all went well and merrily with us till the day that Miriam Maxwell came to be governess to the little girls at the Rectory.

“Well I remember the day when she first appeared in church—a beautiful young creature, with a rich, fair complexion, black eyebrows and hair, small dainty nose and mouth, and eyes like black diamonds. I remember how her eyes roved this way and that way under her dark eyelashes, while still they seemed so modestly drooped over her hymn-book, as she looked over the edge of the high Rectory pew. I remember that my aunt Thomasina remarked as we walked back from church with my father to the Sunday dinner at Brook, ‘Brother John, mark my words, that young woman is a minx.’ But I was dazzled with the girl’s charm and beauty, and so was my father, and in spite of Aunt Thomasina, before long she was for ever running in and out of Brook, sometimes with the children, sometimes without them. And then, one day quite suddenly, she came to us crying, and saying that the Rector and his wife had heard wicked slanders about her, which her enemies in her last situation had set afloat, and had dismissed her with a quarter’s salary; and what was she to do?’ Father and Aunt Thomasina were just then not on speaking terms with the Rector or his wife; but Aunt Caroline went down to inquire, and came back to say

she believed it was only the Rectory fads, and that the Rector's wife had been listening to those who were jealous of the girl's good looks; and the long and the short of it was, that she came to us to teach me music and French. For my education was but backward, my father never having let me have a governess or go to school. I thought I was now going to be perfectly happy, and longed for George to come home from college that I might show him my dear Miriam; for indeed Miriam Maxwell had the gift of fascinating all who came within her reach, men or women—for a time; and I saw nothing for a long time but what she wished me to see. If she did what I should have disapproved in any one else, I forgot to disapprove it in her. But my eyes were opened—oh, how unwillingly!—when George came home, and she fascinated *him*.

"I cannot even now dwell upon that time. First I laughed joyously; then a little misgiving crept in and I laughed forcedly; then I laughed no more, for I became aware that she was deliberately stealing his heart away from me, and yet I was too proud to complain. At last I went to pay a visit to a friend at a distance, and while there I wrote to George, setting him free, and to my father to say that I had changed my mind, and had decided that I should not be happy with him, but hoped we should always remain good friends and cousins. I did not wait long to hear the result of my letter. She and George eloped the next clay over the border, and were married in Scotland; and that summer vacation of his turned me from an innocent, unsuspecting girl into a bitter, miserable woman.

"Years went on: Uncle George and his wife died: my father followed: George came to Greythorpe as master, and I lived on at Brook. I made no sign to George, nor he to me. My aunts told me of the gossip that was afloat: how ill George looked: what a bad wife Miriam made him: how she flirted with other men: how—the servants said—she kept private stores of brandy and champagne in her dressing-room, and was not always quite herself. All her children had died except one little boy of four years old—a delicate sickly child, whom his mother neglected, but who was the delight of his father's heart. Once, when I was driving past Greythorpe, I saw a tall bearded man leading a donkey on which a pale little child was seated on a box-saddle. I should hardly have known George, he was so changed with his stoop and his beard, but that behind the donkey walked old Monson, whom I had known from my earliest childhood. George looked up, and when he saw me his pale face flushed, and he took off his hat with a hurried bow. There was something so broken-down about him that I could not help stopping my pony to speak to him. 'Is that your little boy?' I said, and he took him off the donkey and brought him to my pony-chaise. 'This is my Leonard,' he said; 'Leonard, say good-morning to Miss Brook.' Anti though I had not meant anything of the sort, when I saw the sweet little wistful face I could not take the little bony hand he held out for me to shake, but held out my arms, letting the reins drop, and held him to my breast, kissing him as I doubt if any woman had kissed him before. Then I said, 'You must bring him over one day to see me and Brook;' for something went out in my heart towards the little fellow, and I could not even remember that he was Miriam Maxwell's son.

"George took me at my word. The next time his wife was away—and she was away very often—he wrote and asked if he might bring Leonard to see me and Brook; and I told him to come at the earliest opportunity. So they came to early dinner. George seemed to me to be too much taken up with every movement of the child to think about the past. He was much gentler than he used to be: I had grown harder. He did not mention his wife, except to say that she was coming back in a week, and that he supposed they would spend the autumn at Scarborough, as she liked it better than Greythorpe. 'I hope the sea-air will be good for the little chap,' he added.

"Poor little Leonard! hard as I was to all the world I could not be hard to him. I took him on my knee and cuddled him off to sleep, for even the little exertion of dragging round the garden-

walks holding his father's hand had evidently tired him. George stood and looked at me wistfully, 'Do you think he looks much more delicate than most children, Hester?' he said.

"I made some common-place remark, I forget what, and then they went away. George talked of coming over again, but when his wife returned nothing more was said of it. By and by Greythorpe was filled with people—not George's equals, for they would not visit Mrs. George Brook—but a rough, flashy, drinking set, and it began to be reported that George had taken to drink as well as his wife. Greythorpe was no respectable house now. It hardly came as a surprise to any one when it was announced that Mrs. George Brook had eloped with a captain of dragoons, and that George Brook had challenged him to a duel at Ostend, in which the challenger, though not killed, was mortally wounded. He lived a few weeks, leaving Leonard to my guardianship, and then died—murdered by the woman who had robbed his heart from me.

"Then began a few years which to me were full of all the sweetest hopes and fears of motherhood. Leonard came to me: I was his nurse, his teacher, almost I may say his mother: certainly far more of a mother than the woman who had borne him and deserted him. He was a sweet, intelligent child. The only trouble he gave me was the extreme fragility of his health; and I loved him with a truer and purer love than I had ever felt for any other human being. I hoped that he might be Brook of Brook, and that the happy family love which fate had denied to me might be his in abundant measure. But it was not to be. When he was ten years old he caught diphtheria. I nursed him day and night. On the fourth day he died, and I was myself between life and death from the same disease when his body was carried to the vault in Brook church, where all the Brooks, except poor George, have been buried for generations, and where I shall soon lie myself.

"However, I did not die: we Brooks are too strong to die easily: but I was long in recovering, and should have been thankful not to recover. The world seemed but little worth returning to when Leonard's sweet little face was hidden, and his loving voice silent. But I returned to life at last: and here, after this long prelude, I will give the narrative for the sake of which I began to write:—

"I was sitting in the arbour one sunny June morning, trying to draw a spray of Virginia-creeper just unfolding its tender springing curves which hung down from the roof before me. My hand, however, was somewhat unsteady from weakness, and by and by I leant back in my chair still holding my pencil lightly with its point resting upon the paper. Suddenly I felt a curious tingling in my hand and arm, and at the same time I found that my pencil was slowly moving over the paper. I was almost absolutely still; but every time I breathed, some slight movement of the pencil took place. At first I thought my hand was unconsciously drawing; but soon I found it was writing. First, a looped small *l*, then a smaller one—no, it was an *e*; then the pencil went round and round several times to form an *o*; then followed *n*, *a*, *r*, and a capital *D* with a twist at the top, and a long straight line to the end of the paper: 'leonardD was unmistakably clear upon the paper before me.

"I do not suppose any of my acquaintances, who knew me as 'poor Hester Brook,' and pitied me for my queer unsociable temper, which had evidently fitted me for nothing but to be a dour old maid, as my aunts were before me, would ever have believed how that beloved name thrilled me through and through. It was a pleasure to me only to trace it with my fingers, but I was surprised at the *involuntariness* with which they had traced it. I took up the pencil again, keeping the joint of the elbow loose, so as to give free play to every involuntary motion, and letters again began to appear. I shut my eyes, determined not to spell out the beginning of the words, and

guess the end. The pencil went on moving, until a long straight hue touched the edge of the paper, and I opened my eyes and read, 'leonaRD is writing.'

"Was it—could it be—that the little spirit I loved so much was here, communicating through my hand? The bare hope made me eager to experiment further. I proceeded to ask questions verbally, and they were answered through the pencil. The sort of questions and answers were these:—

" 'Are you really Leonard?'—' Yes, I am just the same as I was with you, only quite well.' 'Are you happy?'—'Yes, I am happy; we are all happy here: but you must be happy too.' 'How can I be happy now that I have lost you?'—'You haven't lost me, I am with you all the same: but when you cry it makes me sad.' 'Is there anything that I can do to make you happier?'—'You can help people to be good, that is what you are left in the earth-life for; if not, you would have passed out with me. When you make other people glad all the spirits are glad, and I am glad too.'

"This was the beginning of my spirit-writing, as I called it to myself. I have heard that 'automatic writing' is the name learned men give to it. It was a great solace to me while it lasted, and it did me a great deal of good. I roused myself from my selfish grief, and interested myself in my neighbours, rich and poor, as I had never done before; more than once I was able to bind up broken hearts, who had lost those they loved, with my own certainty that the veil was very thin between us and them. I was quite happy in the company of my little spirit-child, and never so happy as when alone sometimes there seemed to be other forms of communication. Now and then I heard a gentle tapping. Sometimes I thought I saw soft small globes of blue light floating about the room: sometimes I seemed to feel a presence near me only in thought, without visible manifestation. I felt that I had attained to a higher region through Leonard's death, and did not know how much in me, though buried for the time, had to be exhumed and consumed before my soul was cured of hatred and bitterness.

"For there was one recess of my soul where this still harboured, and the object of it was Miriam Brook. I heard nothing of her for sometime: at last there occurred a celebrated divorce case in which she was the principal figure, and then I heard nothing of her for years. I did not even think of her much: any casual association with her in the past struck rue with a sense of loathing and horror. She seemed to me to represent a visible incarnation of all that was evil and foul, and I hated her with all the vindictive hatred of the Brooks reinforced by my moral loathing of her character and actions. Perhaps I did not quite realize where one ended and another began.

"One day I had gone for a long walk, and came round by the village. During that walk little Leonard had been very close to me, bringing the sense of warmth and sweetness to my dry heart which he might have done if he had been in physical fact my child and George's. It was an October day, chilly when the sun went down behind the moors, in spite of the sweet warmth of the windless afternoon. I came down from the moors into the cold white fog of the village, and there full in the road, with the grey light on her ghastly painted face, stood Miriam Brook. When she saw me she advanced to meet me with would-be assurance, as if nothing had happened.

I looked at her and passed upon the other side. She followed me and touched me, changing her tone to entreaty. I shook myself free and passed on. On through the village I went without looking behind: when I reached Brook I stopped for a few minutes to speak to the woman at the lodge-gate, whose mother was ill. Then I went on through the park till just as I was within sight of my own house, hurrying footsteps came behind me, and a sobbing voice cried, 'Hester, Hester!' I walked on, but the footsteps came so fast that I could not move without running. I turned round, and at the sight of Miriam all the pent-up hatred of years seemed to find its way to the surface of my soul.

“ ‘Hester, Hester, I am starving!’ cried the miserable woman.

“ ‘I am glad of it,’ I said grimly. ‘You have made others suffer, now it is for you to suffer in your turn. Who murdered her husband, and brought shame upon her innocent child? You shall have no help from me.

“ ‘But I have not tasted food since yesterday morning. I shall die if you will not help me. I have been a wicked woman, Hester. I have wronged you—but if you had wronged me as I have wronged you, I would not refuse you bread or shelter for this night. I shall die before long in any case.

“ ‘You always knew how to excite interest for yourself,’ I said with a little sneer. ‘Have you forgotten how you came crying here when you were turned away from the Rectory, and we believed you and were kind to you, and how you rewarded us? Probably if the truth were known you are truly thankful that neither husband nor child live to reproach you.’

“ ‘No, no!’ she said indignantly, ‘not Leonard! I’m not so heartless as that! Hester, Hester, believe me! I have wronged you, but I have suffered too.’

“I was walking on, and she came running by my side, with weak uncertain steps, crying and entreating. I turned round sharply and looked into her face, feeling as if something flashed out of my eyes and struck her. ‘Begone!’ I said. She cowered, and turned slowly away; and I went on into the house.

“I was very ill at ease—far too perturbed to have any communication with my little spirit-companion. I went to bed early, but I could not sleep. At night the wind rose and shrieked all round the house, and it seemed to me as if I heard a child’s sobs, now and then, borne in upon the blast. Once I fell into a disturbed sleep and heard Miriam’s gasping entreaties, and felt her clinging cold hand like ice, and again the child’s sobs. I woke and found that by some sudden movement I had upset the glass of water which stood on a bracket at the head of my bed, and that my hand was touching the wet sheet. But I could not go to sleep again, and lay and tossed till morning came.

“My butler came in to wait on me at breakfast next morning with that look of subdued importance servants have when anything tragic has happened that they wish to tell. Then he told me that a woman—a lady, he would say—had fallen into the river last night, near by Soken bridge—‘and folks do say,’ he added, ‘it’s Mrs. George that was. They say she was seen in the village yesterday evening—some say she had had too much, and some that she was clemmed with hunger and not herself that way—anyhow, poor thing, she got into the river somehow in the night.’

“And which of these three surmises was true no one ever knew: perhaps, in a way, all: but to me the tragedy that struck the neighbourhood seemed to be far less tragic than my own share in it. For surely, if any one had driven Miriam to her suicide—I knew it was suicide—I had been that woman. But my punishment was sharp and bitter.

“For from that day onwards the power of spirit-writing departed from me. I tried in vain to resume the companionship that had been so dear and sacred to me: I might hold the pencil for hours, but nothing came but unmeaning marks, or if any letters were formed, I could never tell but that I myself was forming them and inventing the letters which spelt out the messages for which I craved. I might sit for hours in the dark—no sign of any presence came to me. Little by little I came to understand that my own cold and cruel inhumanity to a fellow-creature had shut the door between me and my little Leonard’s spirit. I might cry out in the darkness, I might moan with as bitter entreaties as the starving woman I had repulsed: nothing but darkness and silence answered me, nor has from that day to this.

“But nevertheless I have not chosen to sit and moan outside the closed door. The world is full of sadness and sorrow, and I have felt that I might even yet do something to lessen its sadness and lighten its sorrow. This is why I have always felt it my duty to welcome the lowest outcasts and to devote myself to their help, if thus I might atone a little for my cruelty to Miriam Brook. I do not know whether in that strange life beyond death which will soon be familiar to me I shall ever have the opportunity of asking pardon of my enemy. But if I may, neither labour nor suffering shall prevent me from reaching her and falling at her feet to ask her forgiveness. Then perhaps I may be worthy to look upon Leonard’s sweet face and feel his dear presence again.”

“Well, what do you make of it?” said the Doctor as the Vicar returned the MS. to him.

“There is no doubt that she believed her own theory,” said the Vicar.

“None whatever. It’s a curious psychological study, though. She was in a weak nervous condition after the diphtheria, and the scribblings her pencil makes on the paper look like letters, when they are simply the mechanical vibrations of her own weak muscles—she gets L-e- and then guesses the child’s name, writes it herself, and thinks some unknown power moves the pencil. Then all the rest of the delusion grows and flourishes till she drives off the boy’s mother and hears of her suicide—and that brings on another nervous crisis which dissipates the delusion.”

“Then you put it all down as a matter of nerves?”

“Entirely.”

“But surely there was a very remarkable phenomenon behind the nerves, if so. Her moral growth—”

“Well, I think she was morally at her best when she was devoting herself to those poor creatures, and her nerves were normal. But I told you to give me your clerical explanation.”

“I haven’t one,” said the Vicar, “except that I should say that what you call the delusion she was under had a very valuable training effect upon her moral and spiritual nature. I cannot believe that pure delusion, with nothing at the back of it, could do that. Moral and spiritual actions must have causes and effects which touch the spiritual world.”

“I don’t understand anything about the spiritual world,” said the Doctor, “the physical is enough for me.”