

# THE BOLTED DOOR

BY GEORGE GIBBS

## CHAPTER XXV. The Devil and the Deep Sea



ABBY'S rapid inductions had not erred. Natalie and René De Land were together. Natalie had gone to the 56th-st. house, where she had intended to stop awhile and alone and undisturbed try to find some way out of her troubles. She had been surprised to see René when he came; but did not question him as to how he had learned that she was there. But there he was, and she was even sure that she was glad to see him. They had sent to a restaurant for food, and now they sat over their coffee and René's cigarette. Natalie's cheeks glowed with two red patches and looked as though they were daringly artificial, and her eyes sparkled strangely. But she had eaten little and drunk sparingly. She had offered René no explanation, and he was clever enough to know from her mood that it would have been futile to ask questions.

It was René's tact that had won him a way in the service of the State Department from an obscure consular clerkship to his present appointment; a short career in which his appreciation of the foibles of women had taken a conspicuous share. And so he was wise enough to be thankful for his good fortune without questioning Providence too closely. When Natalie was more composed she would tell him what he wanted to know, and in the meantime it was his mission to be cheerful and patiently wait. He beguiled her with the latest gossip from Washington, told her a few amusing incidents in the recent career of a newly arrived Western Senator, and made known his own plans for the immediate future. To all of which she listened, asking perfunctory questions, answering shortly, with nervous nods and gestures. But René was a philosopher and an epicure.

But René was not disturbed. The handsomest woman in New York was his *vis-à-vis*. What more could the soul of man require? The gods were good. It meant something that Natalie had not sent him away. And so he smiled at her and sniffed at the rim of his glass of Château Yquem.

It was not until the servant had withdrawn that he sensed the moment of confidences.

"Tell me," he murmured at last, "what is it, Natalie?"

She frowned at her coffee cup; but smiled when she replied. "I think—I'm glad—you discovered me."

"Is that all?" he laughed.

"I think so. Don't you feel flattered that, no matter how much I dislike other people, I am always content to be with you?"

"Content!" he scowled. "That's poor food for a starving man. Won't you tell me what has happened? What is it?"

She refused a reply to his question and turned the topic with a laugh.

"You don't really look hungry, René."

"I am. You've starved me all summer. Do you expect me to be content, like you? 'Content' is a poor word; it misses undesire only by the breadth of a hair. To be content is to be provincial. Content suggests the honest husbandman, his good wife, and rustic inertia. Content is a negative term."

"And yet I'm quite positive about it," she insisted with a smile.

He laughed at that and sank to the leather chair beside her. "Is it because you know how irresistible your indifference is that you elude me so? What is the use of dissimulation? Can't you be honest? Don't you think you've kept me dangling long enough? Isn't there a spark of the old feeling, the spark you had that night in this house, in this very room, the night before you were married? You loved me then—I know it. You would not kiss me, even,—you never have,—but I read what I wanted to read in your eyes. You needed me then, and you need me now."

And still she would not reply.

"I hoped when I learned you had come here that it was because you wanted to see me; that you did not want to think of my going so far away without you; that perhaps you had at last decided that the life you were living was intolerable; that perhaps you were ready to leave all this and go abroad, as I once recommended to you that you do."

"I had thought of going abroad," she stammered.

He put his arm around her and drew her close to him. "Did you?" he whispered. "And with me?"

"No, alone!" There was nothing in the touch of her hand to encourage him; for it lay in his fingers like an inanimate thing. "I—I'm glad to learn your plans," she added, "so that when I come over—I—may not miss you."

He laughed softly. "Did you think there was danger of that? Do you suppose that if you were anywhere in Europe I could keep away from you?" he paused and eyed her narrowly. "That wasn't what made you let me stay here with you."

"No; but I'm glad you came."

"So that you can tell me I content you!" he sneered.

There was an assertiveness in his voice that gave

her a throb. She withdrew her hand from his and folded her arms. "Or that you don't content me—when you use that tone."

HE was wise enough to recant at once, and sank forward contritely, his elbow on his knees, his face in his hands. "I don't understand. There are times when I feel as though I had never known you, Natalie. Haven't I been patient? Haven't I obliterated myself all summer and thought only of your feelings; consented for the sake of being near you to every arrangement of yours that might save you from gossip; stood in the background like a foolish college boy; bored myself to extinction with your friends, waiting for chances to see you alone—chances that never seemed to come? There isn't another woman in the world who could have made me do what I have done for you. Just to be near you, that's all, just to hear the sound of your voice, or to get the reward of a grateful glance from your eyes."

He felt the light touch of her hand on his shoulder and looked up, to find her smiling kindly.

"Yes, René, you have been an angel," she said. "Don't change now. I want your affection more than ever. Don't let us quarrel, not to-night. Won't you be generous again? It is hard to be patient when everything seems so hopeless."

He stared gloomily at her. "Don't you think I deserve a little more of your confidence, more faith and tenderness?"

"I've given you faith, tenderness. Tenderness means many things. I can't give you the kind of tenderness you want. I can't give you what does not belong to me; but I will reward you, René, soon. I have reached the limit of endurance, the very limit!" She paused, and he waited. "I will never willingly see him again," she said stifflingly, "nor her!" she added.

René's twinge of delight did not show on the face he turned to her. "You have learned that what I said was true?" he ventured sagely.

"Yes, yes! It is true. I thought it was too odious to be true; but it is—horribly so. Oh, don't ask me to tell you! I will not speak of it. I want to get away from it all, away from New York, where I can forget the whole hideous travesty!"

"And then?" he asked.

"And then divorce," she said harshly, "as soon as it can be managed. Divorce, absolute, final! It is the only thing that will satisfy me; so that I will not bear his name, or have anything about me that can remind me of my insults or his infamy." There was a sullen lowering of her brows and a set look at her lips which drew her face in ugly lines. "I'm going to consult some one at once," she went on rapidly. "that is why I'm glad to see you. Do you know who can help me? I thought I might live quietly abroad for a time—"

"Why not go at once?"

"I will—soon, when I find what I must do."

De Land had taken one of her hands and while she talked was patting it gently. His touch seemed to soothe her; for she lay back in her chair quietly, and he felt a pressure of her hand in response to his own.

"Let me manage it for you," he said. "These matters are arranged every day. It is possibly the simplest legal proceeding in the world. Modern civilization has required it, Natalie. You are taking it too hard. Your pride is hurt."

"My pride—yes, hurt to the death—the woman—my best friend."

"It is a mistake to have best friends." He stopped and then questioned suddenly, "Will he consent without trouble, or will it be necessary to tell the facts?"

"I hope he will consent; but if he refuses I shall not stop at half measures. I shall threaten him with her," she muttered bitterly. "Perhaps he will assent quietly to save the woman. Otherwise she must take the consequences. I should like to see her punished. I shall not care if the whole world knows of it!" There was a savage glitter in her eyes and a flush on her cheeks which made her worth looking at. De Land had never seen her so handsome.

IT'S not too late to begin again, Natalie. Before long you will regret there ever was such a man as Brooke Garriott. What can such a man know of the heart of a woman like you? He belongs to the soil, a mole who can do only the thing to which he was born. You belong in another sphere,—of music, art, culture, gaiety. Even in New York you have not lived. Paris is the only city in the world. I can offer you something now, the entrée to any court in Europe. I could have had a legation in the East if I had wanted it, or South America; but I thought of you and chose a secretaryship, to be in Paris. Think, Natalie dear, what that means to you and to me,—the sumptuous life of the gayest capital in Europe, the contact with its most brilliant minds, in a place where refinement counts for something, where subtlety is understood! I want that world to see you. You will have it at your feet. Doesn't the thought appeal to you?"

"Yes," she whispered, "yes!"

"Don't be unhappy, Natalie. What can you care for them? There's no use crying over mistakes. Of course you're sorry for Abby. So am I sorry. I've been sorry for her for a long time, because it was clear she had lost her head over him at the beginning. I don't blame her for loving him—any more than I can

blame you for loving me. She is merely unfortunate."

"As I am unfortunate."

She did not mean what he thought she meant; but he went on blindly. "What does the world matter? I've waited for you patiently because I respected you and because I knew my opinions were too radical; that you would not be willing to agree—"

"No, René," she smiled, "I am not willing to agree—not to that. That pose of yours is picturesque. It has always been amusing; but I've never been foolish enough to take it seriously. You would like a kingdom of sentimental chaos. How quickly you would tire of the love of woman if it was to be had everywhere for the asking!"

"It is to be had everywhere; but I can never think of any woman but you. I am not a child. I've found my way about the world for over thirty years. There's only one woman in it, only one!" He drew her closer to him; but as his lips touched her she sprang away.

A DARK red colored his brow as he straightened. De Land was a man who timed his psychological moments with rare artistic precision. To one of his trainings to be out of one's poise was to be a failure. Awkwardness to René was a more palpable sin than any forbidden in the decalogue. It seemed impossible that he could have again made a mistake, and this time her elusiveness maddened him. He got up and faced her angrily.

"Do you think I'm a dunce?" he said brutally. "What on earth do you mean? Is my kiss so repellent? Is my touch so polluting?"

She held out her hands. "Don't, René, don't!"

But the blow to his self esteem stung him viciously, and his much vaunted patience flew to the winds. "I'm not in a mood to be trifled with. For months I've given you the best that was in me. I've hung on your wishes like a dotting imbecile. I always knew that wasn't the way to treat with a woman; but I did it because I thought you were different from the others, that you'd have the sense to see how much it was costing me. But you didn't. You've taken advantage of my forbearance and treated me without consideration. I've given and given, and received nothing in return. Why, even he has had more than I have! He was cleverer than I, because he had the sense to take what belonged to him."

He leaned with one hand on the table between them, and she listened to the unfamiliar ring in his voice with troubled silence.

"I've been a fool over you. When a woman like you guards her lips so sacredly, it is because she knows that if she yields them to one man she can never give them to another, or because," he lowered his voice and went on rapidly, "because she has reasons of her own more important—because she fears for herself, for the disruption of all the orderly ideas of girlhood—"

"René!"

He went on heedlessly. "The world says you are cold, Quakerish, insensible. I have known other women who created the same impression. Do you think I could be as mad about you as I am, if I had not gaged the real depths of your nature—yes, even better than you have yourself? Every woman is born to be won, some in one fashion, some in another, if not in a conventional way, in one not so conventional. I've stood too long on ceremony. I've been generous long enough. I won't give any longer! I want you to kiss me, Natalie. I want you to let me take you in my arms and tell you what love means to me."

She hid her face in her hands, and that angered him again. He came a step nearer. "If you won't give, I will take!"

AT the words she looked up at him in dismay. He was transformed. His polish was gone, the veneer stripped off, revealing the ugly grain beneath. It was another René. She remembered the hot temper of his youth, which in his manhood he seemed to have conquered. She examined him curiously, not frightened yet, only very perturbed and distressed; for they had been friends many years and she could not think of him as of an enemy.

"You will not kiss me if I am unwilling to be kissed," she said gently.

"I will!" he muttered. "I'll kiss you now!"

She saw that he meant it and, really apprehensive, retreated to the door of the pantry, put her hand on the knob, and turned to him with the semblance of a smile.

"If you come nearer, I shall call," she said; for the caretaker and his wife were in the kitchen.

"No, you will not call. I don't think you're really in a position to make a scene. I fancy it wouldn't sound well on the tongue of gossip that you fled here—to me, not just now when much depends on your own probity. Besides, Natalie dear, you dislike scenes, especially before servants. You see, I know you better than you think I do."

He suddenly dropped the rôle of defiance, came forward, and caught her hands away from her face. "Why do you force me to be so brutal to you? Can't you see that you have driven me to my last resources? Natalie, Natalie darling, tell me you are sorry!"

His arms were around her now; but she held her head down, and one hand still intervened. She would not speak. But she felt that his strength was subduing her, and then she struggled fiercely in his arms, the sight