

SARAH DOUDNEY

A VANISHED
HAND

Sarah Doudney
A Vanished Hand

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=24620645

A Vanished Hand:

Содержание

CHAPTER I	4
CHAPTER II	13
CHAPTER III	19
CHAPTER IV	28
CHAPTER V	35
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	41

Sarah Doudney

A Vanished Hand

CHAPTER I

IN A BACK ROOM

"For one shall grasp, and one resign,
One drink life's rue, and one its wine,
And God shall make the balance good."

– *Whittier.*

Elsie Kilner had a battle to fight, and it must be fought after her own fashion. It was the kind of battle which is fought every day and every hour; but the battlefield is always a silent place, and there is neither broken weapon nor crimson stain to tell us where the strife has been.

Elsie's battle was fought in a back room in All Saints' Street on an afternoon in March. It was not a gloomy room; although the window looked out upon walls and roofs and chimneys, she had a good clear view of the sky. Some pigeons occupied a little house outside one of the neighbouring windows, and there was a roof covered with red tiles on which they loved to strut and plume their feathers in the sunshine.

To a woman country-born the sight of pigeons and red tiles called up visions of an old home. The memories which came to Elsie in her London room were as fresh and sweet as the breath of early spring flowers.

She could see again the red manor-house among the Sussex hills, and the old green garden which winter could never quite despoil. The cherry-tree spread its boughs close to her window, and seemed to fill the room with the delicate dewy light of its blossoms; the winds came blowing in, sweet and chill, from thymy common and "sheep-trimmed down."

Perhaps she had never seen her home so plainly with her bodily eyes as she saw it now in imagination. Our everyday blessings are too common to be looked at in their true light; but when time and change have put them far away from us we see them in all their beauty.

"It makes me feel desperate," she said half aloud to herself.

She had a dark, delicate face, as changeful as an April sky. It was not a happy face; the dark eyes were restless, the soft lips often quivered. And yet, in spite of sorrow and unrest, and the experiences of nearly nine-and-twenty years, there was an extraordinary freshness, almost girlishness, in her appearance, which did not suffer even from the close proximity of younger women. The mourning dress, fitting closely to her graceful figure, told its own story of recent loss.

In that old manor-house among the Sussex hills her bright youth had been calmly spent. Then came her mother's death, and

changes began in the home-life. Her father was growing weak in mind and body. Elsie was the only daughter, and the household cares and anxieties pressed heavily on her heart and brain. When Robert, her brother, suggested, with all possible kindness, that it would be well if he came with his wife to the Manor and shared her labours, she welcomed the proposal gladly.

So Robert and Bertha arrived, bringing with them their little girl and her governess; and the old peace fled away for ever.

For two miserable years Elsie lived on in that altered home, and saw everything that she had loved sliding gradually out of her hold. Robert introduced many new plans, all for his father's comfort, as he continually declared. Bertha took charge of the household, and the simple habits of the past were given up. Old servants were pronounced incompetent and dismissed; and when Elsie protested against these changes, her brother and his wife dropped the mask of civility.

There is no need to go over all the details of the wretched story. Old Mr. Kilner, growing more feeble every day, suffered himself to be guided entirely by Robert and Bertha, and Elsie soon found that his heart was turned away from her. Then came the end. The will was read, and everything was left to Robert Kilner.

"But Elsie cannot say that she is not provided for," said Bertha to her friends. "Her godmother – old Mrs. Hardie, you know – left her a hundred and fifty a year. Quite a fortune, is it not?"

Turned out of the old home, Elsie had come straight to

London, and had sought shelter at a boarding-school where a friend of hers was a teacher. Then, after a careful search of six months, a friend had directed her to this quiet house, and she had gratefully settled here. She welcomed solitude as one who has so many things to think over, that it is indispensable.

There was a letter grasped tightly in her hand, as she stood looking out of the window. It had come from the rector's wife, who had been her mother's friend in happy days gone by. The old lady had written to say that there were wild doings at the Manor, and the country-side was ringing with tales of Robert's extravagance and dissipation. The Kilners had never been wealthy; there was just enough to keep up the old house in quiet comfort, and that was all.

"Robert will soon come to an end of everything," wrote the clergyman's wife with the frankness of long friendship. "We have heard that he was deeply involved before he came to live at the Manor. Bertha is beginning to look sad and worn and crestfallen. People have looked coldly on her since you went away, and if she ever had any influence over her husband, she has lost it now. The air is full of unwholesome rumours. I am glad that you are no longer here, my dear child."

The letter had given Elsie a cruel pleasure – a pleasure which was so hideous that her better self could not endure the sight of it. It was only the darker side of her nature which could entertain this hateful joy for a moment. And so the battle began in her heart on that sunny March afternoon.

There were certain outer influences which seemed to act upon that inward strife. The sky helped her with glimpses of holy blue and faint hints of the coming spring. Even the spire of a church helped her, although it could only point a very little way up into the far heaven. She stood quite still, wrestling silently with that fierce temptation to rejoice over her enemy's downfall.

All Bertha's insulting speeches and unkind actions came back into her mind. It might be impossible to love her, but it was – it must be – possible to be sorry for her blighted life and darkened home. Elsie called up a vision of the dressy, well-to-do Bertha, who had always put herself into a front place, and wondered how she could play the part of a neglected wife, looked down upon by her neighbours and forgotten by the world?

The thought of the crushed woman, who had so little in her interior world to help her, was not without effect. Pity triumphed. Elsie's dark eyes were suddenly dimmed with tears; she was grieved for Bertha and ashamed of herself. The fight was over, and a voice within her seemed to say that it would never have to be so fiercely fought again.

She drew a deep breath of relief as she turned away from the window, putting the letter into her pocket. The tea-tray, with its solitary cup and saucer, was waiting on the table, and Elsie poured out tea, congratulating herself that she was alone. She was not an unsociable woman; but the boarding-school, with all its noisy, merry occupants, had set her longing for solitude. She had felt far too weary and dispirited to enter into the fun and

prattle of the girls.

While she drank her tea she glanced round the little room, surveying the decorations which had kept her busy for a day or two. Some relics of her old home-life were gathered here – a quaint oval looking-glass, some bits of ancient china, some photographs, and a goodly number of books. Her little clock ticked cheerfully on the mantelpiece, one or two richly-coloured fans and screens brightened the walls; there was a faint scent of sandal-wood in the air. She had not yet unlocked the handsome desk which stood on a table in the corner, and it occurred to her that she would answer some of her neglected letters that very evening.

Going to the desk, and opening it, she noticed for the first time the table on which it had been placed. It stood in the darkest part of the room, and she had not observed its old-fashioned claw feet and the curiously-wrought brass handles of its drawer. It was not a sham drawer, but a real one, which opened easily with a gentle pull, and appeared at first sight to be quite empty.

"It is large enough to hold a good many of my treasures," thought Elsie, putting in her hand. "And here are some old papers, quite at the back! I will take them out to make room for other things."

The papers were not old nor discoloured by time, although the dust had settled upon them pretty thickly. They looked like pages torn out of a diary, and were covered with writing which struck Elsie with a sense of familiarity. This handwriting, firm, black,

legible, was like her own.

"How interesting!" she said to herself. "I have always flattered myself that mine was an uncommon hand. But somebody – a woman evidently – has stolen my e's and b's and g's and y's. I should like to know a little more about her."

She forgot all about the open desk and unanswered letters, and sat down on the edge of the sofa near the window with the papers on her lap. The shadow had vanished from the delicate expressive face; the dark eyes had brightened. Elsie had the happy temperament which is charmed with every little bit of novelty that it can find. She loved, as she had often said, to investigate things, and always caught eagerly at the slightest clue which might lead to a delightful labyrinth of mystery.

The manuscript began abruptly. The first words on which Elsie's glance rested were these: "If I could only be sure that some one would be kind to little Jamie!"

This sentence was written at the top of the first page, and then came a vacant space. Lower down, in the middle of the leaf, the writer had gone on: "What a new life came to me all at once when I met Harold for the first time! The path was so flowery and bright that I had no fear of the turnings of the way. It seemed the most natural thing in the world that we should meet, and walk on together all our lives. No, we did not meet; he overtook me as I was sauntering along, and looked into my face with that look which a man gives the woman who is to belong to him for ever and ever."

Elsie paused in her reading and lifted her gaze thoughtfully to the evening sky. Her face had changed again; the expression of eyes and mouth was wistful and tender.

"No man has ever loved me in that fashion," she mused. "I've had lovers, but I was never meant for them nor they for me. I wonder why this unknown woman had the joy of finding her spirit-mate when such a joy has been denied to me? Are they married? Where is she now? I wish I knew her."

No one who had seen Elsie at that moment would have doubted that she had had lovers. She was very pretty to-day; prettier at twenty-eight than she had been in the days of girlhood. Some new feeling of peace was creeping into her heart and hushing all its turmoil into a sweet rest. Some new interest was beginning to stir in her life; much was quieted within her, and much was wakening. She felt as if she had roused after an uneasy sleep and tasted the first freshness of a fair morning.

She sat a little while in silence, thinking about the unknown writer and her Harold. Although she had read only a few lines, she felt drawn towards this woman whom she had never seen. It would have been good to have had her for a friend.

Where was she now? Living somewhere with Harold, perhaps far away in the country. Elsie could fancy the pair coming homeward through ferny lanes in the first shade of the twilight. She pictured the woman, dark-eyed and dark-haired, like herself, and the man tall and fair, with a grave yet gentle face. They had a great deal to say to each other, as those who are one in spirit

often have. They answered each other's thoughts; there was the fulness of a calm content in every tone.

And then she turned again to the manuscript.

CHAPTER II

WHAT WAS WRITTEN

"And Love lives on, and hath a power to bless,
When they who loved are hidden in the grave."

– *Lowell.*

"Every one said that it was a hopeless thing to get engaged to a poor curate," the writer went on, "and I was only a poor teacher, so the folly was not all on one side. We were wonderfully happy in our folly, so happy that we were full of pity for Mr. Worldly Wiseman when he happened to cross our path with his contemptuous smile. Even Harold's sister Ellen, with her cold blue eyes, had no power to chill us in those days. Frigid as Ellen was, I liked her better than James, her husband, who always pretended to be fond of me. He was a man of the 'good fellow' type – burly, and loud of voice. But Jamie, dear little lad, bore no resemblance to his father at all, and was only like his mother in her best moods. Oh, poor little Jamie!

"I am not writing a novel; I am only telling of things that really came to pass.

"We had been engaged nearly twelve months, when an old man died and left Harold £2000. I do not expect any one to understand the gladness which that money gave us. It is enough

to say that I began to prepare my wedding clothes, and Harold went hunting for suitable lodgings in all his spare moments. The clothes were finished, and the lodgings found, when a terrible thing happened.

"James had always known all about Harold's affairs. He knew that our money was lying at the bank, waiting till a good investment was decided upon. He pretended to have found a safe investment, and he got the money into his own hands and absconded.

"Ellen confessed afterwards that she had known of her husband's difficulties for many months. She feigned ignorance of his whereabouts, but I always believed that she knew more than she told.

"As I said just now, I am not writing a novel; I am telling things in the plainest way, and in the fewest words. Most people, I daresay, would have survived the loss of £2000, but our hope was taken from us with the money. Harold was not strong. He was the kind of man who needs a wife's love and care, and the thought of our prolonged separation was more than he could endure. He went about his parish work as usual; no one missed a kind word because his heart ached, no good deed was left undone because his hands were tired. And yet, O Harold, how hard it was for you to labour in those days!

"He carried his cross manfully, although he staggered sometimes under its weight. And he bore his great wrong with that mighty patience which he had learnt from his Master.

"It was in the early spring that a sickness broke out among the poorest of his flock, and Harold had but little leisure. One night he was summoned from his bed to visit a dying man who prayed that he would come. And that night, when the bitter east wind smote him and the rain beat upon him, he heard the Master's call to rest.

"Do not think that I am an unhappy woman. I went down with him to the very brink of the river – that river which has been a terror unto many, but had no gloom for him. In those last moments I believe he knew that we should not be parted long; I see now that he had that swift glimpse into the future which is sometimes granted to a departing saint. How can I be unhappy when I am so sure that he is watching for me?

"Ellen sent for me to come to her. She says she has got a death-blow. James has written, telling her that she must never expect to see him again. He has deserted her for some one else, leaving her to struggle on here in poverty with her child. She has now confessed that she knew that James meant to get possession of Harold's money; she was in his confidence from the beginning.

"'We wanted to prevent your marriage with Harold if we could,' she said. 'We never liked you, Meta; but you are avenged. I sent for you to tell you that you are avenged on me.'

"Just for a moment my heart cried out that this was as it should be. Within me there was a struggle, brief and strong. But how could my better nature fail to triumph, helped as I was by Harold's loving influence? Oh, my love in heaven, I will not be

conquered by evil; you are on my side – you, and the angels of God!

"It is bitter weather. I sit, up at night to mend and make Jamie's clothes, while he sleeps soundly in my bed. Dear little fellow; it does me good to see his cheeks so rosy and round, and his curly golden head half-buried in the pillow. 'If thine enemy hunger, feed him,' said the Master. It might be hard to feed mine enemy, but it is a labour of love to feed mine enemy's child.

"If I am called away, who will take care of Jamie? My landlady, Mrs. Penn, is a good woman, but one can hardly expect her to take up the burden of a little boy. And yet I think Jamie would be more of a blessing than a burden. He has the sweetest ways I ever knew, and there is a look of Harold in his blue eyes. How the wind howls to-night!

"It is a melancholy November.

"It was a curious thing that I should have a fainting fit in the street. Poor Jamie would not let my hand go when they carried me into a shop. When I came to myself I saw his dear, frightened little face looking up at me. He is not yet four years old – and I am getting weaker and weaker.

"I will write to Harold's old college friend if I can find out his address. It must be somewhere among Harold's papers. Arnold Wayne – ah, I wonder if Arnold Wayne will be good to the boy?

"Last night I had a dream of Christmas. Harold came to me in my dream, and said that I should hear the angels sing on Christmas day. I woke up to find the frosty moonlight shining

into the room, and Jamie, half awake, complaining of the cold. I folded him closely in my arms, and we both fell asleep.

"I am very feeble to-day. I must not try to go out of doors. There is a little money in hand. Jamie looks at me and kisses me. Oh, Jamie!"

That was all. The handwriting, so firm at first, was straggling and faint at the close. Twilight was creeping fast into the little back room; the fire was getting low, and Elsie shivered in the chillness.

She knew now that this woman, whom she had almost envied, had passed away from earth. They were together – Harold and Meta – in the home of souls, where love finds its full satisfaction and rest.

Perhaps Elsie's vision of the pair was not as unreal as it might have been supposed to be. The thought came to her, as she sat musing in the twilight, that wherever there was a home there must surely be homeliness. The hope of a home, denied to them on earth, was realised in the eternal life – that life which has no need of marriage because the spiritual union is complete without the earthly tie.

She folded up the manuscript carefully and reverently, and put it back into the drawer of the table. But in doing this she did not put it out of her mind. Where was Jamie now? It seemed to her, that evening, as if the vanished hand of the writer were beckoning her onward to begin the search for the boy.

Meta had been wronged, and had suffered, oh, how deeply!

Meta had fought the good fight and had won the victory. And to Elsie, in her loneliness, there came a great longing to take up the love-task which Meta had been suddenly called to resign, and care for Jamie as the dead woman had cared for him.

But how was she to begin her search for the child? She knew him only as Jamie. By some curious oversight Meta had not given any of the surnames of those whose story she had written. There were but two surnames mentioned in the manuscript, Penn and Wayne.

Mrs. Penn was a landlady; Arnold Wayne had been the college friend of Harold.

Elsie moved quietly about her room, busy with many thoughts as she lighted the lamp and shut out the evening sky. It was a beautiful sky, with soft rose tints touching the grey of the gloaming, and a star gleamed faintly above the tall spire. She gave a wistful look at that star before she drew down the window-blind.

CHAPTER III

TAKING COUNSEL

"But round me, like a silver bell
Rung down the listening sky to tell
Of holy help, a sweet voice fell."

– *Whittier.*

"I shall consult Miss Saxon," said Elsie to herself. Sunshine was streaming in through the Venetian shutters of her bedroom, and the street was waking up to its busy morning life. The light rested in soft yellow bars upon the wall, and lit up the pretty frilled toilet-cover which Miss Saxon's hands had made. To those hands belonged that good gift of womanly skill which is a blessing to any household. Already Elsie had learnt to rely upon their owner, and believe in her sagacity. If any one could help her in her perplexity, it was surely Miss Saxon.

A spirit of peace seemed to brood over her little sitting-room when she sat down to breakfast. Perhaps the scene of a spiritual victory is destined, ever afterwards, to know an atmosphere of repose.

Out of doors there was the clear blue of the spring sky, the whiteness of snowy clouds floating out of the reach of the smoke, the cheerful light warming the red tiles whereon the pigeons were

taking their morning exercise. Altogether the world seemed to wear an encouraging aspect that day.

Miss Saxon had that gentleness of expression and manner which is often sweetest when youth has fled. When Elsie, with her black dress and sad face, had come to the house, she was cheered by a hundred little tokens of thoughtful kindness. The good fairy who had made the frilled toilet-cover was always at work, and her goodwill was manifested in pretty little flounces and furbelows, which gave a sort of old-fashioned grace to the rooms.

A little later Elsie was pouring out the story of her discovery of the manuscript, and Miss Saxon was listening in her quiet fashion. But her first words gave Elsie a chill of disappointment.

"At present I don't see how I can help you, Miss Kilner," she said. "That old table came into the house a few days before you arrived. I happened to see it outside a broker's shop, and thought it would be the very thing I wanted to fill up that corner."

"And the shop – is it near here?" Elsie asked anxiously.

"Very near; but I don't know much about the shopkeepers. The man seemed rather rough, but the woman was decent and civil. We will go and make inquiries."

"I thought that Meta had lived here," Elsie said in a disappointed voice.

"No. Your rooms were occupied for six years by a single gentleman. He had something to do in the City, and seemed to be a confirmed bachelor. But he married at last, and the rooms

were vacant till you came to them."

"If Meta had ever lived in this street you would have known something about her, would you not?" Elsie asked.

"I might have known. We have lived here for many years, and have seen many changes. But there is no reason to suppose that she was ever here. We have first to learn where the table came from before we can get any clue that can be followed."

So those two, Miss Saxon and her eager lodger, went out together while the morning was still fresh and bright.

Looking back on that morning afterwards, Elsie remembered that everybody seemed to be seeking something. People were hastening along; women were going to the churches where there were daily services; sisters, in their white caps and black draperies, marshalled a troop of little girls in red cloaks, and seemed to have a world of business on their hands; men stepped on briskly with a preoccupied air. In all there was the great expectant human nature ever urging onward. In all there was the universal life-quest. Many, if they had known what manner of quest it was which had called Elsie forth, would have laughed her to scorn; others would have wondered; some might have wished her God-speed.

Leaving the two churches behind, Miss Saxon led the way into another street in which a perpetual market was held. Here there were hungry faces, sottish faces, sickly faces, and an endless pushing and jostling around the costermongers' barrows. It was a touching thing to see the poor bargaining for flowers – ay, and

a hopeful thing, too, to those who can interpret signs aright.

They came at length to an old horse-hair sofa, an iron bedstead, a bath, and two or three hearth-rugs; and behind these articles there was a narrow door, which Elsie entered with some reluctance.

If you are fastidious or superstitious, a broker's shop in a low neighbourhood is hardly the place that you will choose to visit. One does not know what unwholesome associations may be clinging to the chairs and carpets and pillows which hem you in on every side; or one naturally recalls wild stories of haunted banjos and tambourines, and tables which are said to slide about in an uncanny fashion of their own accord.

Elsie was no weaker-minded than most women, but it must be confessed that she followed her guide through that dark doorway after a moment's hesitation.

There was, however, nothing weird about the aspect of the woman who came forward, with a baby in her arms, to greet Miss Saxon. She was still young and pretty, with that delicate London prettiness which meets one in these crowded thoroughfares at every turn. The baby had a shawl drawn over its bald head, and peered out from its shelter with eyes just beginning to observe the sundry and manifold changes of its little world.

"It is rather more than a fortnight ago since I bought a table here," Miss Saxon began. "It was a very old-fashioned table with brass handles and claw feet. Do you remember it?"

"Yes, ma'am, I do," replied the woman, after a moment's

consideration.

"Here is a lady who wishes to know where that table came from. She fancies it belonged to some one in whom she takes an interest," continued Miss Saxon in her quiet voice. "We have come to know if you can tell us anything about it?"

Elsie's heart throbbed fast in the pause that followed. The baby looked at her and gave a faint chuckle, as if it triumphed in the thought that even grown-up people cannot find out all the puzzles of life.

"It came from a house in Dashwood Street," the woman said at last. "They had a regular turn-out of old furniture, and my husband bought a good many things. I'll go and ask him the number of the house."

She disappeared into a gloomy region at the back of the shop, and was lost to sight for a minute or two.

"He says 'twas 132," she said, emerging from the gloom, baby and all.

"We're very much obliged to you," returned Miss Saxon.

"Not at all, ma'am. Glad to have been of use to you."

Elsie came away gaily from the broker's door, in the belief that she was going to walk straight to the goal. But Miss Saxon was less sanguine. Moreover, she had no great faith in the manuscript, and seemed disposed to think that it was written by some one who wanted to make a story.

"It might have been intended for a magazine," she suggested, "and the writer broke off short. We have no proof at all that Meta

was a real person."

"I own I have no proof," Elsie admitted frankly. "But I have a feeling that I must seek out Jamie."

"But perhaps Meta is living and taking care of him still, Miss Kilner. People don't always die when they think their end is near. As a matter of fact, the more they think they are going the longer they stay."

"I know she is dead – I feel it," rejoined Elsie, with unshaken conviction. "I am guided by intuition. It seems like a blind leap into the dark, but I must search for Jamie."

Miss Saxon looked kindly into the dark eyes which met hers with such an earnest gaze.

"Something may come of it," she said after a pause. "Well, Miss Kilner, I promised to help you, and I will."

Elsie clasped her hands suddenly. "I can't do without your help," she cried. "Dear Miss Saxon, you are one of the born helpers – some are born hinderers, you know. Oh, how glad I am that I am come to you!"

"I'm glad too," Miss Saxon answered, with quiet warmth. And then they walked away together in silence, across Portland Place and on to Dashwood Street.

No. 132 was a house which looked as if it could never have contained anything so old-fashioned as Elsie's table. It had been smartened up till it looked more like a doll's house than a human habitation. In the windows there were yellow muslin curtains tied with pink sashes, and amber flower-pots holding sham plants of

the most verdant hue. The maid who opened the door exactly matched the house. She was like a cheap doll, very smart, very pert, and capped and aproned in the latest style.

In answer to Miss Saxon's question she gave a curt reply.

"No; nobody of the name of Penn had ever lived in that house. Mrs. Dodge was the mistress. She didn't know anything about the name of Penn. Mrs. Dodge took the house about two months ago."

"Please take my card to Mrs. Dodge," said Elsie, in a manner which instantly took effect.

They were invited to walk into a hall which smelt of new oil-cloth, and were solemnly ushered into the room with the green linen plants and yellow blinds. Presently Mrs. Dodge, dressed in harmony with her house, came in with a rustle and a flourish. She was a big woman, with hair so yellow and cheeks so rosy, that she seemed the very person to preside over this gaily-coloured establishment.

At a sign from Miss Saxon, Elsie took the questioning into her own hands. She described the table to begin with.

Mrs. Dodge was bland and civil. She had taken the house of her aunt, an old lady who was getting too infirm to attend to lodgers. It was filled from top to bottom with the most hideous old things, and she had put them all into the broker's hands. She fancied she remembered the table, but could not be certain; there were a good many queer old tables.

No; she had never heard the name of Penn. But she had a

young sister who knew all her aunt's friends better than she did. She should be called.

The sister was called, and proved to be a young and smiling copy of Mrs. Dodge. She remembered that she had once seen Mrs. Penn, about two years ago. Mrs. Penn was a small spare woman about fifty. Yes; Mrs. Penn had let lodgings somewhere – she didn't know where – and her aunt had bought some of her furniture. There was an old table with claw-feet, among other things.

"Was the aunt living now?" Elsie asked.

"Oh, yes; she was living at Winchfield," the girl answered. But she was deaf and rather cross, and it was a hard matter to make her understand anything. "Mrs. Tryon, Stone Cottage, Winchfield, near the railway station."

Elsie wrote the address in her note-book, and left Dashwood Street with hope renewed.

"We are getting nearer to the goal," she said brightly. "You see now that Mrs. Penn is a real person."

"And if Mrs. Penn is real, then Meta and Harold and Jamie are real also," Miss Saxon replied. "Yes, I think you have proved that they are not mere phantoms."

"And that is proving a good deal in a world which is full of uncertainties," Elsie cried. "Don't laugh at me, Miss Saxon; I hear a voice calling me to go on! You cannot hear it, I know, but you must trust to my ears."

"I will trust you," Miss Saxon answered, with an admiring

glance at the slight erect figure by her side. Elsie was a little above middle height, and she walked with the step of a woman who has been accustomed to an out-of-door life, as naturally graceful as the swaying of the grasses on a hillside.

All Saints' Street was still warm with the morning sunshine when they came back to their door, and Elsie ran upstairs to her rooms with a light step. Difficulties and trials were to come, but she had made a beginning.

CHAPTER IV

MRS. TRYON

"Just when I seemed about to learn!
Where is the thread now? Off again!
The old trick! Only I discern —
Infinite passion and the pain
Of finite hearts that yearn."

— *Browning.*

"A Letter will not do," said Elsie to her counsellor. "If Mrs. Tryon is a cross person she won't take the trouble to answer a letter. So I shall go to Winchfield."

"Well, it isn't a long journey," Miss Saxon replied, "and the weather is lovely. A glimpse of the country won't do you any harm."

The glimpse of the country did not do any harm, but it awakened a host of sleeping memories.

When she got out of the train at the quiet station there was the familiar breath of wallflowers in the air. It was a flower which her old father had loved, and she seemed to see him walking along the garden paths, gathering a nosegay for his wife in the early morning. Birds were singing the old blithe songs which they had sung in her childhood; there was a flutter of

many wings among the boughs, which as yet were unclothed with green. Country voices came ringing across the fields and over the hedges; country faces, stolid and rosy, met her as she turned slowly into the sunny road leading to the village.

It was not difficult to find Stone Cottage, and, wonderful to relate, it was really built of unadorned grey stone, not of brick. Time had done much to soften the severe aspect of this sturdy habitation; creepers clung to the grey walls – not wholly hiding them, but breaking up the dull uniformity of neutral tint. In the little garden there was such a brave show of jonquils and daffodils that it looked like a golden paradise.

Mrs. Tryon was sitting by the fire in a little room which opened into the kitchen. She was deaf and her sight was dim, but it pleased her to believe that she still kept ears and eyes open to her servant's delinquencies. Years of letting lodgings had developed all the suspicious instincts of her nature; the domestic servant, she argued, was the same all the world over, and always to be regarded with unmitigated distrust. To the last day of her life, Mrs. Tryon would look upon the maid-of-all-work as her natural foe.

The fire was bright; scarlet geraniums made a red glow in flower-pots on the window-sill; a gay china mug, filled with daffodils, stood in the middle of the table; it was no wonder that Elsie received an impression of warmth and gaudy colours when she entered the room. The old woman with the soured face and white hair was the only chilly thing to be seen.

"I don't want Mrs. Dodge to be sending people here," she said, after hearing Elsie's explanation of her visit. "A light-minded, rollicking woman is my niece Dodge. She'll never make that house pay its expenses – never!"

"You knew Mrs. Penn, I think?" began Elsie, anxious to turn the conversation away from the Dodge subject.

"I used to know her when I was in London."

"Where is she now?" Elsie asked anxiously.

"That I can't tell you. She was never a great friend of mine. I was too busy to make friends. She had part of a house in Soho Square. Some people in business had the first floor. But I think she's gone."

"Did you ever hear her speak of a lady called Meta?" inquired Elsie, in a voice that slightly trembled.

"Meta? No; I've never heard the name. Who was she? An actress, I suppose?"

"Oh, no!" replied Elsie hastily. "She was some one who lived with Mrs. Penn."

"Ah, there was a young lady who occupied one room at the top of the house, and did pictures for the papers and cheap magazines. I never saw her, but Mrs. Penn spoke of her once or twice, and seemed mightily concerned when she died."

"Then Mrs. Penn spoke to you of her death?" Elsie said breathlessly.

"Yes; she was a weak-minded woman, Mrs. Penn was, and allowed herself to be upset by trifles. She said that Miss

Somebody was dead – I never could remember names; the name don't matter – and she had called to ask if I wanted any furniture. I said I'd take a couple of small tables and an arm-chair if she'd let me have 'em cheap. I knew she'd got some good, substantial old things."

"And had this furniture been in the young lady's room?" asked Elsie.

"Some of it had, I suppose. She told me that she didn't mean to let the room again; she was going to sleep in it herself," she said, "because it was large and light."

There was a brief pause. The clatter of teacups in the kitchen warned Elsie that she had trespassed on the old woman's patience long enough. A tabby cat, which had been asleep by the fire, got up, stretched itself, and came purring round its mistress's chair.

"Pussy knows it's tea-time," said Mrs. Tryon, bending down to stroke the creature.

Elsie rose to depart.

"One word more," she said, stooping to bring her lips closer to the deaf ear.

Mrs. Tryon glanced up impatiently.

"I never could stand many questions," she muttered.

"Only one more. Did Mrs. Penn ever mention a little boy who lived with the poor young lady?"

"Never," the old woman answered. "And now that's the end of it all, I hope. I shall let my niece, Dodge, know what I think of her for sending folks to trouble me in my old age. Mrs. Penn

was no great friend of mine. I never went inside her door more than twice, and I never set eyes on the artist-lady, living or dead. As to the number of her house, it's gone clean out of my mind!"

The interview was ended; and as Elsie went forth again into the afternoon sunshine she felt a chill of disappointment.

She had learnt definitely that Meta had lived and died in Mrs. Penn's house, that the house was in Soho Square, and that was all. There was nothing about Jamie; and it was Jamie, not Meta, who was the object of her search.

The air was fresh and sweet. A little puff of wind blew the scent of hyacinths into her face. A pretty child smiled at her over a cottage gate, its golden curls tossed by the breeze.

Again she thought of Jamie, picturing the rosy face and golden curls, like those which Meta had described. If she could find the boy, she felt, with a sudden heart-throb, that she must hold him fast. No woman's life is complete without a child's presence in it. There are a hundred ways of filling up the void, but only one natural way. Elsie Kilner was nearly nine-and-twenty, and she was hungering, half unconsciously, after a child's love.

She caught a delicious glimpse of woods, just touched with that first shade of green which no artist has ever truthfully rendered. Men can paint summer and autumn, but the promise of the seasons escapes them; it is too subtle for brush or pencil. You may as well try to paint a perfume or a sigh.

And yet, as Elsie thought, walking onward, there is something in these beginnings which is sadder even than the summer's

ending. Birth is the herald of decay and death, but decay and death are the sure forerunners of new life.

The afternoon was deepening into evening when she found herself again in All Saints' Street, and Miss Saxon's pleasant face greeted her at the door.

"Any news, Miss Kilner?" was the first question.

"No news of Jamie," Elsie answered sadly. "But I must try to find Mrs. Penn's house in Soho Square."

"Does she live there now?" Miss Saxon asked.

"Mrs. Tryon thinks not. She couldn't remember the number."

"That does not matter," said Miss Saxon cheerfully. "The square is not very large; it will only take a little while to go from door to door."

The last light of the day was shining into Elsie's sitting-room when she went upstairs, and it was a light which seemed to flow in like a golden wave from some unseen ocean of peace.

Had she come into this quiet house to be guided, by a vanished hand, along a path which she knew not? All she was sure of was the influence which had turned her feet out of the old road, so thickly set with thorns. Surely it was a kindly power which had led her away from the contemplation of her own grief and wrongs, and had given her a quest!

Something to do, something to seek and to hope for – this is the greatest blessing which can be conferred on a lonely life.

Elsie lighted her lamp, and wrote a long, cheery letter to the rector's wife in the Sussex village; but not one word did she say

about the search for Jamie.

CHAPTER V

MRS. BEATON

"Guided thus, O friend of mine,
Let us walk our little way;
Knowing by each beckoning sign
That we are not quite astray."

– *Whittier.*

It was difficult for Elsie, entering Soho Square for the first time, to realise that it had been one of the most fashionable parts of London till far into the last century. That touch of distinction which still lingers about some of the former haunts of greatness has entirely deserted this old square, and it requires an effort to picture the state of the four ambassadors and the pomp of the nobility who once made it their home. But the garden lacks not that charm of shadowy trees which so often lends a grace to the nooks and corners of the great city, and it is green enough to rest the eyes that are weary with watching the endless march of life.

Elsie made inquiries at a shop in Charles Street, and was fortunate enough to light upon a tradesman who knew something of Mrs. Penn. She had left the neighbourhood, he believed, but he could tell the number of the house she had occupied. It was close by, on the left hand as you entered the square.

As Mrs. Tryon had said, the ground-floor was given up to business, but the upper floors were still let to lodgers. A quiet-looking young widow appeared in answer to Elsie's summons. "No, ma'am, I didn't know Mrs. Penn," she said civilly. "She gave up this house nearly two years ago, and I've only been here six months. It was my sister who took the house after Mrs. Penn."

"Then there is no hope of getting the information I want," sighed Elsie; "unless any of Mrs. Penn's lodgers are here still."

"No, ma'am," said the widow again; "they are all new-comers. I am sorry that I can't help you."

There was a pause; Elsie was hesitating before she made a request. "There is a room at the top of the house which I should like to see," she said with an effort.

"There are three rooms at the very top," the landlady answered. "Two are small, but the front room is a good size."

"It is the largest room which I want to see," Elsie said.

The widow considered for a moment. "It's let to a gentleman who teaches languages and translates foreign books into English," she remarked at last. "He's out now, I think. Will you follow me, ma'am?"

Elsie's heart beat faster. As she ascended flight after flight of stairs she told herself that there was nothing to be learnt by going into the room which Meta had occupied, and yet she had a longing to be there.

They gained the top at last, and as they crossed the threshold of the chamber a dash of rain beat suddenly against the windows.

Elsie's hands were clasped together tightly under her cloak. She was thinking of those winter nights when Meta lay here shivering with Jamie by her side; she thought of the lonely hours, when the house was still, and the weary worker had sat up to mend the little garments which should keep the cold from the boy. It was such a meagre tale which Meta had told. But Elsie, with her woman's heart and quick intelligence, could fill in all the details.

The sunshine followed the rain. While she stood musing in silence a light broke through the clouds and shone right into the room. That light brought with it a sudden feeling of Sabbath calm and peace. The wonderful inner consciousness (which seems to be wanting in some natures) received a message of quietness and comfort, and Elsie knew, with quiet certainty, that Meta's sufferings were not worthy to be compared with the bright rest which she had won.

They only stayed for a few minutes upstairs, and then went down in silence. As Elsie, a little tired now, was passing out into the square again the widow suddenly recalled her. "There's an old lady in Wardour Street who used to know Mrs. Penn," she said; "a Mrs. Beaton. She keeps her son's house. You'd find her at No. 127."

In a moment Elsie's weariness was forgotten. The sun was shining; it was still early in the afternoon; her time was all her own. She thanked the civil widow, and turned her steps at once towards Wardour Street.

If she had not been so deeply absorbed in her purpose she must

have paused, arrested by the quaint things which were displayed in Beaton's window. It was not, perhaps, more fascinating than other windows in that wonderful street, but it had a great store of delicate ivory carvings and lovely mosaics. Yet Elsie merely gave a passing glance at these treasures, and, passing swiftly into the dim interior of the shop, asked if she could see Mrs. Beaton.

A sallow man, who was young without youthfulness, looked at her with an expression of surprise. She began to explain the object of her visit. "I am in search of a Mrs. Penn," she said frankly. "I have been to the house in Soho Square which she used to occupy, and I was directed here."

"We knew Mrs. Penn," the man answered; "but my mother seldom sees people. However, I'll ask if she can give you any information."

He disappeared, and a pale-faced lad stepped quickly into his place behind the counter. After waiting for a few moments Elsie heard a door close, and he came back. "My mother hasn't heard from Mrs. Penn since she left Soho Square," he said. "She cannot tell you anything about her."

An exclamation of disappointment broke from Elsie's lips; she moved impatiently, turning her face towards the door. The man looked at her keenly, with dark eyes shining through his spectacles.

"If you knew Mrs. Penn," she began, with a quiver of distress in her voice, "you must have known a young lady who lived with her. Her name was Meta."

"Yes, we knew her," he answered quietly. "Are you a relation of hers?"

"No." Elsie turned to him with a sudden lighting-up of her face. "But she is a great deal to me! And you really knew her?"

"We knew her," he repeated, "while she lived. Her story was a sad one. I thought you were related to her because you are like her."

"Like her?" Elsie echoed. "I must have grown like her through thinking about her so much! But I never saw her in my life."

The man still looked at her, with a glance kind as well as penetrating. "I daresay my mother will be ready to have a chat with you," he said, after a moment's pause. "Excuse me; I will go and speak to her again."

She waited, looking out through the doorway, and feeling that she was nearer the goal than she had ever been before. A strange joy and excitement thrilled her as she heard the shopkeeper returning.

"My mother will be glad to see you, madam," he said.

As he spoke she caught the gleam of firelight in a room at the back of the shop. It was a neat little parlour in which the old lady sat, and she rose to receive her visitor with quiet courtesy. Elsie sat down in an arm-chair, close to the window overlooking a little back-yard, and Mrs. Beaton attentively studied her face as she spoke.

"My son tells me that you want to ask some questions about Mrs. Penn and Miss Neale."

Elsie started slightly.

"Miss Neale?" she repeated. "Ah, that must be Meta."

"Did you not know her as Miss Neale?" the old lady asked.

"I only knew her as Meta. I found a manuscript of hers in the drawer of an old table in my lodgings, and I have been seeking her ever since. That search has brought me to you."

"A manuscript? Did it tell you her story fully? Was it long or short? She had not time to write much, I think, in her last days."

"It was not long; only the outlines of her story were told. The manuscript began with the words, 'If I only knew that some one would be kind to Jamie,' and ever since I read them I have been longing to find Jamie and be kind to him."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.