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HESBA STRETTON AT HOME.

It was a glorious summer's day, and I called on a friend at Putney, in the afternoon, in order to induce her to go for a walk. The French window of her room was wide open, and outside it, set prettily off against the shrubbery, a small party was assembled for tea. Three ladies formed the party; one was my friend, the hostess, and with her were two other ladies.

'I was just wishing that you might come,' my friend greeted me, and then, instead of embarking on the orthodox ceremony of introducing, she added, with a smile, and looking at one of the two ladies, 'Do you know who this is?' evidently pre-supposing that I did know. But I did not, and could only say, apologetically, and inwardly disgusted with my great talent for not remembering people, 'I know the face quite well, but I cannot place it at the moment.' This was no mere and meaningless form of speech; I had often seen pictures of the grave, sweet face, the large grey eyes, the silvering curls, and the picturesque, foreign-looking cap.

'It is Miss Hesba Stretton,' I was then told, 'and this is her sister, Miss Stretton.' And thereupon we settled down to a little partie carree, and to a big, long chat.

I have no recollection of any special subject of conversation that afternoon, but what I do recollect very vividly is that, though I tried once or twice to give a twist to our talk which might bring us to the interesting subject of her authorship, Miss Stretton would much rather talk of other things. Also, I went away with the distinct impression that I had made the acquaintance of two women, whose lives were so sweet, so honest, so useful, one must needs be the better for knowing them. Hence I was truly glad when they invited me to come with our mutual Putney friend and see them at their home on Ham Common.

One autumn afternoon we went to Ivycroft, where Miss Elizabeth and Miss Hesba Stretton have made their home.

My friends have often laughed at me when I stated my conviction that some houses had souls, and some had not. But I maintain that this is true, and Ivycroft, on Ham Common, has a soul. The house is two hundred years old, not very large, but picturesque, to my mind, with the picturesqueness of the

period just before the days of Queen Anne. You enter it by an ivy-covered gate, and if you are fortunate, then that gate, and the path to the door, and the steps, and the entrance, appear to your mind's eye always with an attractive figure of an elderly lady smiling a welcome to you; with yet another lady, of a pale, strong, honest face, not far off; and of a jolly Irish terrier, Sandy by name, keeping well in the rear, but never out of sight.

about the house, you remember that Mr. Philip Stretton, the nephew, is one among the foremost of the younger generation of animal painters, and that you have seen his canvases again and again on the walls of the Academy.

Richmond and Ham Common were glorious with April sun and air when I went again to Ivycroft. For a while we chatted on, as people chat who meet again after a period during which each has followed his or her own work and

very clearly by this time that Miss Hesba Stretton does not care to talk about her work, and that, it would plainly give her pain if I returned to the subject. But Miss Elizabeth Stretton, the strong, clear-headed elder sister, to whom her sister's praise is dearer than her own, might perhaps help me. I lured her away from the drawing-room into a cosy corner at the other side of the house, and petitioned, 'Now tell me something about your sister's work. How did she first begin to write?'

It is a good story that of this graceful and popular writer's life-work. Her real name, I should perhaps explain, is not Stretton, but Smith, and the name Hesba is prettily composed of the initials of the five sisters, of whom 'Hesba' was the third. The girls lost their mother while they were yet quite young; their father was a bookseller and a bookworm, kind to his children, but quite absorbed in his beloved books. The mother's pedigree, by the way, has quite lately been discovered to go back to 1158, when the founder of the family was Chancellor to Henry II., and was made rector of Bakewell by him. It is said that through six hundred years, through nineteen generations, the Bakewell family has been distinguished by brain-power above the average.

Mr. Smith and his daughters lived at Wellington, near Shrewsbury, and very very quietly did the girls' days and years go on. An uncle had left the younger sister a house at Stretton, and 'Hesba' was staying there on a visit when her elder sister Elizabeth came one day and told an amusing story which someone had told their father in her hearing. 'Hesba' listened in silence, and later on, worked the incident out into a little story. Not, however, with any idea about publishing it, but simply for her own and her sisters' amusement. But Elizabeth, the elder sister, thinking that the story had some literary merit, sent it,

without the writer's knowledge, to Charles Dickens, and very soon afterwards a wonderful letter came, containing a cheque for £5, and a request for more stories of the same kind. Can't you imagine the joy and delight of that cheque, quite apart from its monetary value? I think I feel the thrill that must have flashed through her as the

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HESBA STRETTON.

The interior of the house is very pretty. There is nothing luxurious, but neither is there anything tawdry or in bad taste. Somehow you feel that things are just what and where they ought to be. The pictures on the walls reveal the fact that the artistic as well as the literary taste of the family is far above the average. And, as you look at some of the animal pictures

play. Then the talk turned on Miss Stretton's latest and as yet unpublished work, produced in collaboration with 'Stepniak,' the Russian exile. It is, I believe, a story of religious persecution in Russia, and will, no doubt, be deeply interesting whenever it appears. And so on till tea-time. The afternoon was drawing to an end; I must get my information now or never. Yet I saw

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