

From Out
the
Silence

Lucy Maud Montgomery
1934

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From Out the Silence

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Anne Hamilton had wakened from a dream of Edith. It is a strange thing to dream of the dead. There in your dream they are living, but still you know somehow that they are dead. It was the first time she had dreamed of Edith since her death, but although they had been walking together, Edith's face was averted—always averted. So the dream was no comfort to her, and her memory of Edith's face in life was becoming so blurred and indistinct.

Anne had a strange defect—or rather lack of a faculty. She could not remember faces which she had not seen for some time. She could not call up before her mind's eye a picture of them as other people seemed able to do. Edith had been dead for six months, and she was forgetting what her old friend had looked like.

There was no picture to help her. Edith had never had a photograph taken. It was an odd kink of hers. She was determined that no picture of her should exist after her death. Anne had never been able to budge her an inch on this point.

It was six months since Edith had died, but it was a year since they had quarrelled. That foolish, senseless quarrel over scapegrace Jim Harvey! It had come up like a flash out of the blue. They had often enough talked of Jim Harvey before and they had never quarrelled, although they always disagreed. Anne had no use—never had had any use—for Jim Harvey. Edith had always loved and defended him. That they should quarrel over him was unthinkable, yet they had done it. Edith had been worried over something that day. Perhaps Anne had been a little tactless. Something had been touched on the raw. And they had quarrelled bitterly after thirty years of flawless friendship. They would have made up if Edith had lived, Anne was desperately sure of that. But she left soon after for her trip abroad, and in Italy the telegram, sent by a cousin who knew nothing of their quarrel, had reached her, telling her that Edith was suddenly dead. Anne buried her face in the pillow and moaned as she always did when she recalled the anguish of that moment.

When she came home the autumn rains were beating down on Edith's grave, and there was nothing for her to do on stormy winter evenings that followed but sit alone and think of her lost friend. She could not even find alleviation of her pain in books. Everything she read reminded her of Edith. They had read and talked over so many books. There were poems and passages all through them that Edith had marked. If it had not been for the quarrel, these things would have comforted her. Now they were like a knife thrust through her heart.

Owlwood was shut up and tenantless. Never again could she look up to the hill and see Edith's light on it. And Edith had died in bitterness with her—without a word of love or remembrance. There lay the intolerable sting. Anne would have given anything she possessed to have known that Edith had thought kindly of her before

death—had wished for reconciliation. She could not have done so when she had left no message. The Hamiltons had all been so bitter and unrelenting when they had quarrelled. Edith had gone away into the silence from which forevermore no word of reconciliation could come.

Anne's loneliness through the winter that followed her return to Glenellyn was terrible. She had always been a rather distant, reserved woman, reputed proud, and had no other intimate friend. Edith and she had been all in all to each other. They were almost of an age and had been friends from girlhood. Edith's young husband had died so soon after their marriage that it never seemed to Anne that Edith had really been married at all. Alastair Graham had left his wife a fortune, and Owlwood was a thing of beauty; but she had spent as much time in Anne's modest little home on the outskirts of Croyden as she did in her own.

Anne had known enough of grief in her life to know that, in time, even the bitterest memory fades out into a not unpleasing sweetness and dearness of recollection when there is no poison in it. She knew that, if it had not been for the quarrel and the fact that Edith had made no gesture of reconciliation even when she had known she was dying, her memories of Edith would have been her companions and comforters. She would have been free to imagine that Edith was still there, free to think of her in the moonlit twilights they had loved, in the garden where they had talked among the flowers they had planted. The jokes they had savoured together would still have an echo of merriment; even their old silences—silence with Edith had been more eloquent than talk with another woman—would be beautiful to recall.

But now . . .

"My days are nothing but ghosts," said Anne bitterly.

They would never be anything but ghosts. And she was not old—only forty-eight. Long years might be before her—bitter, empty years. All her memories poisoned and rankling.

"If there had been one word—just one word. If she had only mentioned my name!"

The misery of her dream of Edith's averted face went with her all day. Everything was embittered for her by it—the loveliness of her garden, the beloved willow-ware pattern plates Edith had given her two Christmases ago, the golden silence of her sun porch, the beautiful moods of the shadowy hill to the westward of Glenellyn, the soft, new-mooned skies, the tree they had planted together in memory of a soldier cousin who had died in the war. Jim Harvey had escaped the draft by some chicanery. It was something Anne had said concerning this that had brought about their quarrel. She had often said worse things than that to Edith about Jim Harvey—that frank,

friendly, charming scoundrel. Edith had never flared up over them. She had always agreed sadly that he was by way of being a bad egg.

“But I can’t help liking him,” she used to protest whimsically. “He will be liked. I know everything you say of him is true. I know I ought to be ashamed of a relation who is a slacker and an embezzler. I am ashamed of him—and I keep on liking him. I think it was because he was such an adorable baby. Even you can’t deny that. I loved him as soon as I saw him and I can’t seem to get over loving people once I begin. You can abuse him as much as you like, Anne. My brain agrees with every word you say. But my heart simply won’t. If I knew where he was I’d try to help him in some way.”

She had always been so good-natured over Anne’s viewpoint. And then to flare up as she did and tear asunder the bonds of a lifetime! Anne could never understand it.

Cousin Lida dropped in that evening, full of family gossip as usual. Anne couldn’t bear Cousin Lida now. She and Edith used to have so much fun over Cousin Lida. She really was a comical old dear. Anne remembered how Edith used to “take her off.”

“That Maureen thing is out of the hospital,” she said.

Anne winced. “That Maureen thing” was Jim’s wife, the pretty, common little hairdresser he had married. None of the family except Edith had ever taken any notice of her. After Jim had escaped arrest for embezzlement by departing for shores unknown, she had opened up her shop again and managed to support herself and her children and her childish old aunt. Then she had to go to the hospital for a serious operation.

“She looks dreadful, and she hasn’t a cent,” went on Cousin Lida. “She couldn’t keep up the rent of the shop, so she’s lost it. It’s a judgement on her, no doubt.”

Anne found herself smiling painfully over what Edith would have made of that. Maureen was not the person any cousin of the Hamiltons should have married, but Anne didn’t know just what she had done to deserve a “judgement.” She had been faithful to her scapegrace husband and she had done her best to look after his children.

“What is to become of her?” asked Anne.

“Heaven knows,” said Cousin Lida in a voice that sounded very dubious of heaven’s knowledge. “It’s a pity Edith isn’t alive. She would have helped her, I don’t doubt. I know she meant to leave her something in her will, but she went so sudden, poor dear, she hadn’t time to make one. It should be a warning for us all. John Alec ought to do something. He got all Edith’s money because he was her half-brother.

But he always hated Jim and he won't lift a finger to help the poor widow."

"I'll look after her," said Anne.

She was even more amazed than Cousin Lida over her own speech. Until she found herself saying it, she had no idea of such a thing. But Edith would have done it.

"You! But I thought . . . and how can you? You haven't got more than enough for yourself," protested Cousin Lida, a little outrage in her tone. Anne was stripping them all of any excuse for not helping Maureen.

"I've house room for them," said Anne. "And they can be fed somehow."

A score of times during the summer that followed, Anne asked herself why she had been such a fool. She never felt reconciled to what she had done. It hadn't been necessary really. Maureen could have put the children and her aunt in some home and found some way of supporting herself. Instead, she, Anne, had saddled herself with their support and—worse still—their companionship. Anne did not mind the pinching and scrimping made necessary to stretch her little income over six people, to say nothing of two dogs and a cat. But it was unbearable to have her home overrun and her life turned upside-down and inside-out. For that was what it felt like.

One couldn't exactly hate any of them—Anne would have felt rather better if she could have hated them. Maureen was such a good-hearted, vulgar little soul. She jested at everything Anne held sacred and laughed and talked and told stories in excruciating grammar from morning to night. She told all the details of her operation to everyone who came to the house. She slammed doors and entertained her women friends loudly after Anne had gone to bed. She had plucked eyebrows and shallow blue eyes with no thought behind them. She had no idea what reticence meant. She was constantly and cheerfully suggesting changes that would improve Glenellyn. Anne was horrified at the thought of any change. She was passionately loyal to her home—all its virtues, all its faults. And Maureen would pat her condescendingly on the shoulder and tell her she was a darling old thing and nothing should be changed if she didn't want it.

Anne tried to like the children. They were not unlovable. But the things they did! There was hardly a day they didn't smash something. Maureen never tried to control them.

"I was bossed to death when I was a kid," she said. "My children ain't going to be repressed like that. They're going to enjoy their childhood."

Perhaps they enjoyed it, but nobody else did. And Jimmy was sick more than half the time.

“He always takes everything that comes along,” Maureen would say philosophically—and leave the nursing to Anne and Aunt Beenie.

Aunt Beenie was the one Anne detested most. She reproached herself for this. Poor old Aunt Beenie! Well-meaning, harmless, but terrible.

There was something so uncanny about her. She had lost her memory almost completely and constantly muttered to herself in a senile fashion Anne found peculiarly repulsive—even more so than her sudden fits of inane laughter. Then memory would return for a few moments and Aunt Beenie would astonish everybody by some quite rational remark or well-told story.

People wondered how Anne Hamilton could endure the gang at all. She wondered herself. Life was a kind of nightmare. She had no peace—no quiet—no Edith. For she had quite forgotten Edith’s face now and she could find nothing but pain still in all her memories of their companionship. That unhealed quarrel must fester forever. In a way Maureen and her family were a blessing. They kept her from thinking. She had no chance to think. Some of Maureen’s friends were always coming or going; the children were always getting into scrapes; the dog was always bringing in bones or tearing up the garden; Aunt Beenie was always wandering off and getting lost or locking herself in the bathroom and forgetting how to unlock it.

“I often wonder why you don’t kick us all out,” laughed Maureen the day Jenny had ruined the new hall wallpaper with greasy fingerprints.

Anne might have wondered if she hadn’t known. Edith would have looked after Maureen. She was doing it for Edith’s sake—Edith who had died hating her.

On the day Maureen and the children and Aunt Beenie went off to the city to visit friends, Anne gazed about her with a sigh of relief. A whole day to be alone! She looked lovingly at her old books, her piano, her pictures, her garden. How she would savour them again! She had locked the dog up in the toolshed and shut Jenny’s kitten in the cellar. Yesterday the kitten had disorganized the household by having a fit and crawling into a hole in the kitchen wall behind the stove. Anne had to send for men to tear out half the kitchen wall to rescue it. She had been so angry that she had meant to have the kitten disposed of. But Jenny and Jimmy had screamed themselves black in the face over the mere thought of it, and Maureen had pleaded and Aunt Beenie had cried bitterly without the least idea what she was crying about . . . and Anne had yielded.

But today was her own. A ripe autumn day, with the pale gold of aspens behind the garden. She went out and sat near them. She would do nothing for one blessed hour—nothing but sit there in the beautiful silence.

And then she saw Aunt Beenie coming around the corner of the house.

Anne knew what had happened. Aunt Beenie had run away from Maureen at the station; Maureen had shrugged her shoulders and laughed and gone on the train. Aunt Beenie would turn up safe. She always did.

Any day—every day—comes to an end. Anne thought that particular one never would. She couldn't lock Aunt Beenie up in the toolshed or the cellar. Neither could she stop her from talking. Aunt Beenie's tongue was never still for one moment. She asked the same questions over and over again and cried if Anne wouldn't answer them. And she wound up the day by falling down the back porch steps.

She did not hurt herself in the least. Anne got her into the sun room and made her lie down on the couch. Aunt Beenie was strangely obedient, and had suddenly become quiet. She lay there in silence for a time with her eyes shut. Anne sat, spent, in her rocking chair. She was tired out physically and mentally. She felt that she must scream if Aunt Beenie started talking again. Aunt Beenie did, and her first words startled Anne.

"It was kind of nice of Edith to send you her picture, wasn't it?"

Her tone was quite rational, but there was no sense in such a remark. Anne closed her eyes. It had begun again. Could she bear to hear Aunt Beenie talk about Edith?

"It was a real good picture of her," Aunt Beenie went on in a moving, musing tone. "She said she'd always hated the idea of having her picture took, but she had the artist feller paint it for you. It was like her—my, it was like her, colour and all. She had such a pretty colour—and her red hair wasn't a mite grey. As for her eyes—well, they weren't just eyes in that picture, they were her. What have you done with it? I've never seen it around."

"I don't know what you're talking of," said Anne unsteadily. "There isn't any picture of Edith in existence."

"Oh, yes, there is." Aunt Beenie was looking very cunning. "I saw it, I'm telling you. She showed it to me, to poor old Aunt Beenie. I was up at Owlwood the very day afore she died. She showed me the picture and told me it was for you. She'd writ you a letter too. She put 'em both in a book of yours she'd borried and said she was going to send them to you in Italy for your birthday. I seen it. You can't fool Aunt Beenie. I'm old but I'm awfully cute."

Aunt Beenie laughed and kept on laughing. Her brief interval of sense was over.

Anne got up shakily and went into the library. She walked like a woman in a dream. The book—it had been sent to her when Edith's sister-in-law had stripped Owlwood. Anne had never even unwrapped it; she had hidden it away from sight at

the back of a drawer—that book she and Edith had read and marked and cried and laughed over.

She took it out, removed the paper wrapping, opened it. There was the letter and the picture—a water-colour sketch of Edith. Unbelievably like—the pretty auburn hair, the eyes; Aunt Beenie had been right. They were Edith.

Anne sat down trembling in a chair to read the letter—the letter from Edith.

“Dearest of dear Annes,” Edith had written in her beautiful, unique hand. “I’ve just had a picture painted for you. Sally’s boy has been visiting me. He’s an artist of repute and he’s done the fair thing by me. Flattered me a little, as was proper. I want you to remember me as more beautiful than I really am.”

“Did we fancy we had a quarrel? And did you imagine that you went off to Italy in a huff with me? Dreams all. There’s no such thing as a quarrel between us—couldn’t be, when I love you so much and you love me. We’ll just never think of it again. I’m sending this letter and the picture for your birthday. I hope it will get there in time. And I want you to come home soon, old dear. Because . . .

“I saw my doctor today. He gives me a year if I’m careful.

“I’m content. I want to go while I’m still strong and folks will miss me. I’ve always had a horror of living long enough to lose my wits—like Maureen’s Aunt Beenie.

“On the whole I’m well satisfied with life. I’ve had some splendid moments, some great vivid emotions, some wonderful hours of vision. Yes, it was well worth living. And there’s always been you.

“So hurry home to me. I want to have one more good laugh yet before I die and only with you can I have it. And we’ll walk over the old hill, over the frosted ferny woodside—all the old familiar places we’ve loved. And we’ll ask all the old unanswered questions, little caring that there is no answer so long as we are ignorant together.”

The letter was unfinished. Edith was not to have her year—not even another day of it. But it said all that Anne wanted to know.

Anne was still sitting there in the twilight when Maureen blew in, with the children tumbling over each other behind her.

“All in the dark? Beats me how anyone can like sitting in the dark. It gives me the heebie-jeebies. But I’ve got news—and a job. Fancy! I met up with my old crony, Elinor Honway, today—her hubby has a first-class hairdressing establishment—wants an assistant—and little Maureen has landed the job with a healthy salary. Boy, but it was luck! I’m going right in tomorrow. I’ll get a flat and take the kids and Aunt Beenie. Lord, won’t I be glad to be in town again! Croyden’s the limit, believe

you me. Not but what I know you've been decent, and I'll never forget it."

Maureen switched on the light.

"Why—you've been crying. What's wrong? Aunt Beenie been plaguing the life out of you?"

"No, dear." Anne was very calm; she felt that she would always be calm henceforth. All the ceaseless, gnawing longing gone, all the bitterness. Edith was her own again, all her memories unspoiled and beautiful. "I'm really very happy. I've just had a message out of the silence—Aunt Beenie gave it to me."

Maureen stared, then shrugged.

"Sometimes I think you're nearly as nutty as Aunt Beenie," she said candidly. "But what's the odds as long as you're happy?"

"What indeed?" said Anne.

[The end of *From Out the Silence* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]