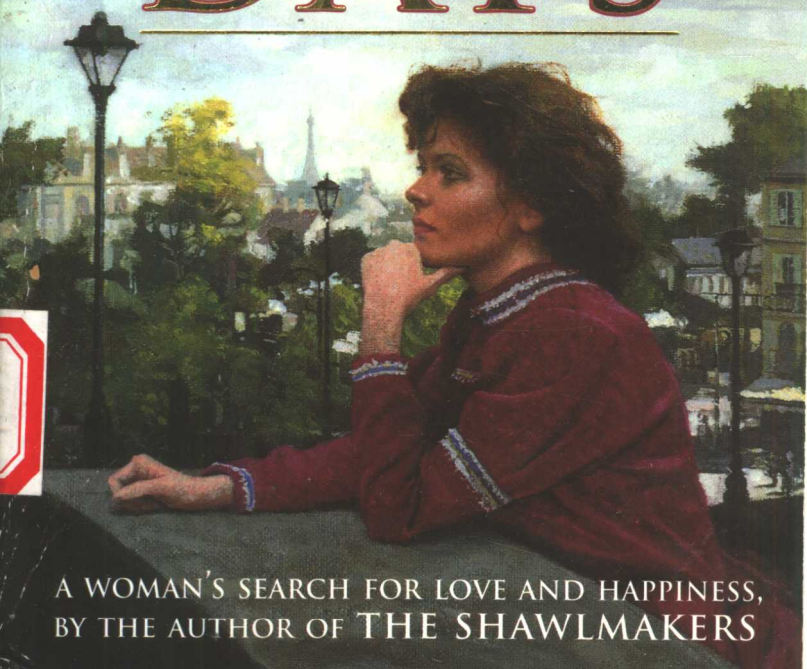


ISOBEL NEILL

AFTER  
MANY  
DAYS



A WOMAN'S SEARCH FOR LOVE AND HAPPINESS,  
BY THE AUTHOR OF THE SHAWLMAKERS

# *After Many Days*

---

**This edition published for Diamond Books, 2000**

**Diamond Books is an imprint of  
HarperCollinsPublishers  
77-85 Fulham Palace Road,  
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB**

**This edition first published in 1994**

**1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2**

**Copyright © Isobel Neill 1994**

**The Author asserts the moral right  
to be identified as the author of this work**

**ISBN 0 26 167384 X**

**Set in Linotron Palatino  
by Rowland Phototypesetting Ltd  
Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk**

**Printed in Great Britain by  
Caledonian International Book Manufacturing Ltd, Glasgow**

**All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be  
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,  
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,  
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior  
permission of the publishers.**

**This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not,  
by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or  
otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent  
in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it  
is published and without a similar condition including this  
condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank the following: Robin Bell; the staff of Paisley Library and Edinburgh Central Library; Emeritus Professor Alan Steele and Professor Ian Campbell of Edinburgh University.

## Chapter 1

*'Puis-je vous aider, Madame?'*

I couldn't believe it. There was I, Jessie Forbes, speaking French at ten o'clock on a fine August morning in Paisley and in Moss Street of all places.

Because most Paisley folk are away at the coast during the first fortnight in August, the town was quieter than usual. The river was low and stinking. To get to the post office beside the station I had to pass the jail and the municipal buildings. There were some coaches there and just as I was passing, a train gave a piercing whistle and set off a blast of steam. One of the horses reared. That set others tippeting around. The drivers were swearing like troopers. I decided it was no place for a lady and started to cross the square. Because of that I couldn't help noticing a crowd gathered round something or someone just at the foot of the Dirty Steps in Moss Street. I really should say Meetinghouse Lane but Paisley Buddies call them the Dirty Steps because all the rubbish seems to get whisked there by the wind. Had the whistle that startled the horse upset somebody with a weak heart?

'Plenty folk there,' I thought. 'No need for me to concern myself.' But my step slowed just the same – partly curiosity, I suppose, but partly a kind of guilty feeling about passing by on the other side. Two women broke away from the crowd when I was half-way across the square. Like me they were making for the

post office. As we drew level I heard one say, 'All the way from France, too. It must be awful to be no' weel in a strange country.' I stopped, considering. I could still speak a bit of French. My brother Dougie had started me off when I was very young and Beth, my eldest girl, had helped me keep it up. I turned my steps to Moss Street.

The woman stood leaning almost defensively against the wall. She reminded me of *The Stag at Bay*. 'They're killing her with kindness,' I thought, looking at the tight ring of concerned faces. 'She must get away from this.' I edged my way through, took a deep breath and '*Puis-je vous aider?*' There! I'd said it!

Her hand went up to move her veil while she dabbed her eyes. The gesture reminded me of something . . . what was it? Then a memory flashed back – my sister Elsie in our weaving shed in Kilbarchan all these years ago, trying on a kirking shawl . . . the same curve of the wrist . . . tilt of the head. The stranger lowered her handkerchief and murmured, '*Vous êtes très gentille, Madame . . . je serai bien . . .*' I looked at the tawny eyes, the straight eyebrows . . . of course there were lines . . . there would be . . .

'Elsie!' I whispered.

She crumpled suddenly and several people rushed to help me hold her. 'Sixpence when you bring a cab from the station,' I called to a wee barefoot lad at the edge of the crowd. He was off in a flash but it seemed ages before I heard the clatter of hooves and then the driver was helping me hand Elsie into the welcome privacy of the cab. She lay back among the cushions while I chafed the blood back into her hands. All the time pictures were forming in my mind. That day so many years ago when I read out Elsie's farewell note

to the others; Dougie's comment when he came in and read it, 'The bitch': that was Dougie who never swore! Mam looking so ill we thought she might have another heart attack . . .

I had made no effort to draw Elsie into conversation, but when the cab slowed down at our gate, she said, 'My luggage is at the hotel in Glasgow.'

'Don't worry,' I said. 'One of the family will fetch it.'

The front door was open by this time. Maggie, the maid, was standing open-mouthed. Then Beth came rattling down the stairs, 'What is it, Mother?'

'Help me get the lady up to the spare room,' I said, 'and Maggie, hot bottles for the spare-room bed, please, and then a nice pot of tea.'

It took a long time to walk poor Elsie up those stairs. Then she collapsed on the edge of the bed, quite helpless.

'Light the gas fire, Beth,' I said, 'while I look out some night clothes. Once she's settled I'll phone Doctor Walker.'

Elsie stirred. 'I do not need a doctor, please, I am quite well – just a little *crise de nerfs* . . . I've forgotten the English.'

'Aye. We understand fine but we'll see later. You look as if it's rest you're needing and Doctor Walker could give you something to make you sleep.'

'You know the lady, Mother?' Beth was puzzled.

'Aye! but we'll talk about that later, too,' I said. 'It's quietness she needs now, a nice warm bed, some hot tea then peace.'

Maggie appeared with the hot bottles. I could see her nose was bothering her but I had no intention of launching into explanations then. Beth went down to

help her with the tray while I got Elsie undressed. It wasn't easy. She seemed absolutely helpless and her beautiful clothes had so many fiddly fastenings to complicate matters. I propped her up with pillows while we waited. Soon Beth appeared alone with the heavy tray.

Weak tears were flowing down Elsie's cheeks. Her hands were so shaky that I had to hold the cup to her lips, but she drank gratefully and I even coaxed her to have a wee scone. Though a little colour came to her face the helpless tears were still gathering. So, when she was finished, I slipped the pillows down and drew the blinds while Beth got the things back on the tray. We closed the door behind us quietly and Beth said, 'What now?'

'Send Maggie out to get some vegetables for soup. I'm going to make a phone call.'

'Dr Walker?'

'No. Nancy.'

Nancy Walker, the doctor's wife, is one of my closest friends. We're always involved in raising money for the infirmary. I knew I could trust her not to blether. The doctor nips into the house sometimes for a quick cup of tea in the middle of his rounds. She would tell him what had happened and he would drop in on us, I knew. And with Maggie out of earshot I could fill in some details for Beth.

'Nancy, I've got something to tell you. It'll be a bit of a shock,' I began, then sketched in the rest. Her reaction was not what I had expected.

'Fancy a douce wee body like you having a sister who could run away with a French artist! . . . You can trust me, of course. I'll tell Bill as soon as he comes in. Will he be safe with La Belle Elsie, d'you think?'



Though I laughed with her, I had some misgivings. Would this be the view other people would take of what had been a heartache to all the rest of the family, particularly Mam? I wasn't sure that I liked being described as a douce body, either. It sounded pretty dull. Then I shook myself and prepared to get on with practical things. Instinct told me that the fewer people who knew about Elsie, the better; that is, till we had sorted things out. But of course the folk in the house would have to know. Even Maggie would have to be told part of it. First, I would have to tell Beth. She must be eaten up by curiosity by this time.

But Beth forestalled me. 'Is that French woman by any chance the sister who became the favourite of Mrs Hyphen-something at the big house and ran away from Kilbarchan with a devil of an artist who'd been staying there?'

'Who told you?'

'Aunt Bella.'

I might have known. We had all agreed to tell the younger generation a modified version of the story but, of course, my sister Bella never could keep quiet for long about anything.

'Fancy a bad apple in your barrel, Mother. And you used to tell us what good little girls you had been . . . doing what Mam told you . . .'

'Elsie was not a bad apple,' I said furiously. 'She was different from the rest of us . . . more dreamy . . . imaginative . . . but she was a genius with a needle . . . taught us younger ones how to sew. That fellow took advantage of her.'

'Ooh, la la,' said Beth.

'You can forget that,' I said. 'Our Elsie allowed no liberties before they were married. She wrote and told

Mam that.' My face clouded at the memory of that awful time, Mam and Faither visibly ageing under the disgrace . . . the gibes and chants of my fellow pupils at school . . .

*Elsie Allen, quack, quack, quack.*

*The Frenchman's got her on her back.*

Beth put a quick arm round my shoulder. 'Sorry, Mother, I didn't mean to upset you. I'll keep quiet, don't worry. See if you can keep her here for a while - it would help my French.'

I had to smile. Beth so often reminded me of Dougie and his thirst for education. Of course I had followed my big brother like a shadow and absorbed a lot of his ideas, I suppose. It thrilled me to see Beth getting the chance I missed.

'Well . . . we'll see about that,' I said. 'We don't know what her plans are . . . why she made for Paisley. None of us lived here when she left . . .'

We heard the sound of the back door slamming as Maggie returned with the vegetables. 'I'll help her, Mother,' Beth said. 'What about taking your hat off before the doctor comes?' I hadn't realized it was still on!

Doctor Walker said more or less what we had expected. 'Nervous prostration. Could be quite serious. I get the impression it's a sort of delayed shock she's had. You've done the right thing in getting her to bed. I've given her enough dope to make sure she drops off now. She'll probably wake late in the evening if not before. Let her have any light food she fancies but don't ask her to talk. It's difficult to tell how it may go. If she asks *you* any questions, answer them simply but don't expect her to remember your answers.

There's something causing her anxiety and until she can shed that, we won't see any progress. I'll come back after surgery tomorrow.'

That evening I found I was shaking when my husband Sandy's key turned in the lock and I heard my two big sons laughing at something he said to them over his shoulder. As usual I went into his arms and immediately felt steadier. Alex gave a teasing whistle while Allen, quiet, serious Allen, said, 'Behold the lovebirds!'

'I hope you're as lucky, lads,' Sandy said. While he spoke he was easing me towards the snug and asking, 'Did you remember to post your letters?'

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Beth motion to her brothers to follow her. The snug door closed behind us. 'What's wrong?' Sandy asked.

'What makes you think anything's wrong?'

'You were trembling like a leaf when I put my arms round you. What's wrong?'

'I don't think something's wrong, but . . . prepare for a shock, Sandy.'

He pulled me on to his knee in the big chair and I galloped through my story. Sandy listened calmly.

'Well . . . well . . . quite a day, wee Jessie! And now, is there any supper for three hungry men?'

'Sandy Forbes, does nothing excite you?' I asked as he shooed me out of the snug.

Thanks to the dope the doctor was giving her, Elsie hardly surfaced. I would coax her to have a little soup or a little bit of toast but her eyes would get heavy or the slow tears would start and I would be glad to see her settle down again to sleep. As Beth had forecast, Sandy told me to keep quiet about Elsie till the doctor advised otherwise.

Beth took it upon herself to inform Maggie. 'It would have been awkward for you, Mother. Keep calm. I just told her that the lady was a member of your family you hadn't seen since childhood; she'd gone abroad and had a sad time there.'

It was on the fifth day, I think, that things changed. Elsie's eyes were shut when I went into her room and started dusting quietly. I had just picked up the lovely handmirror that was one of our silver wedding presents when Elsie spoke from the bed. 'Your hair hasn't darkened at all, Jessie. I was afraid it might.' I dropped the mirror with a clatter and ran to hug her. This time I was the one who was crying.

It was quite some time before I could say anything coherent; then, in spite of Bill's warning, I started on the question which had been uppermost in my mind: 'Why did you not get in touch all these years?'

'Oh Jessie,' she said, her voice breaking, 'if only you knew . . . I can't . . . not yet.' She was shaking with sobs again.

I hugged her tight. 'All right, Elsie. I won't make you talk. Just relax . . . there . . . you'll be fine. We'll look after you. What about a wee cup of tea, eh?'

'Now I know I am in Scotland.' She was half laughing and half crying.

I carried the tray up myself. These first few moments of real communication were too precious to share with anyone. 'Don't worry,' I said as I poured the tea. 'I shan't ask you to tell me anything. Just you get yourself well. When you feel like it, I'll be happy to listen.'

'Tell me, Jessie . . . the family . . . Mam and Faither?'

'Mam died a long time ago, Elsie. Allen, my eldest,

was two and I was expecting Alex . . . that would be May 1881 . . . aye, the lilac was out at the funeral, I mind. She had been sitting out in the garden for a wee while and went in to start the dinner: the pain hit her. It was a shock to us all. She had seemed to be getting on fine.'

'What about Faither?'

I hesitated, remembering. We had all waited on for a long time after the funeral, worn out with a grief that could be shared only with our siblings. Then when our menfolk started to urge us homewards, Faither had made a husky wee speech, thanking us all for being good to Mam. He turned to Dougie's framed certificates. 'Dougie did us proud at university and did more than his share in every way. He died saving another's life. That's a sweet sorrow. But I'll never forgive our bonnie Elsie for the heartache she caused your Mam.' That was one memory I would not be sharing with Elsie!

'Jean and Tam left their house in Johnstone and moved into the cottage with Faither. You know that Jean's cure for everything is work, work and more work . . .'

'I remember,' Elsie said ruefully.

'Faither died at his loom which was just the way he would have wanted it.'

Then came the question I had dreaded. 'And Dougie?' Elsie prompted. 'I expect he had plenty to say when I left.'

I was saved from replying by Maggie's tap on the door; there was a lady to see me; she'd put her in the dining-room. The collector for the mission I supported in the north end of the town must have been surprised at the enthusiasm of my smile. Never had an interrup-

tion been more welcome. I remembered Dougie's bitter face as he whispered to me, 'Don't worry. I'll bring her back if I have to drag her by her hair.'

On my way back upstairs I worked out how to avoid that answer. Elsie was going to hear about Dougie's death sooner or later so now was the time to tell her. I took a deep breath as I settled in my chair. 'This will be a shock, Elsie. Dougie was killed . . . in Moss Street . . . twenty-seven years ago next month.'

'Oh, no, not Dougie too.' Elsie was shattered.

'We were all shocked, Elsie; I miscarried my first baby. He was saving a wee boy who fell from a window. He would have been all right but the bairn was wearing tackety boots and one caught Dougie on the temple . . .'

'Poor Mam . . . her only son . . .' Elsie's voice broke.

I looked at Elsie. Her face was drawn and trembling. I kicked myself for being so stupid. 'I'm sorry, love. This is too much for you, getting it thrown at you all at once. I was hoping you'd come down to dinner tonight . . . meet Allen and Alex . . . no, I think we'd better get you back to bed. I'll bring up a nice tray; then you can have one of the pills the doctor left.' She didn't argue.

Elsie had met Beth, of course, right at the beginning. Sandy had – rather reluctantly, I think – come into her room with me for a few minutes one night. I watched my darling man as he clasped her hands in his big strong ones.

'You're welcome, lass. There's no need to hurry. Just you take your time and do what my bossy wee wife tells you. I always do!'

'And the band played "Believe it if you like",' said I as he made his escape. The tears had welled up in

Elsie's lovely tawny eyes as he spoke to her. When he was gone she just sat dabbing gently with her handkerchief for a while. Then she said, 'You're a lucky lass, Jessie.' It was the first time she had sounded the least Scottish. I answered in kind, 'I dinna need remindin',' and we took another step back to the intimacy of childhood.

For the next few days Elsie still felt unable to tell me any of her story, nor did she want to meet anyone. The rest of the family were all on holiday up north with the young folk.

'You all have such big families,' Elsie said.

'Well, we're married . . . ' I began, not knowing how to meet this.

'Ah, the Frenchwomen have a few tricks,' she said. 'The intelligent ones choose.'

I was none too pleased at being bracketed with the unintelligent.

'I wouldn't be without one of them,' I began indignantly.

'Of course you wouldn't,' she soothed me, 'and if Beth is an example, I think you are the most fortunate woman in the world.'

I calmed down then. What she said had intrigued me. What sort of tricks? It was true, of course, that I wouldn't be without one of them but I could remember Sandy's groan of concern when I announced my first pregnancy. At that time he was worried that I was so young. Later we had accepted the knowledge each time with a rueful resignation. Now we were comfortably off with a nice big house and I had Maggie to help me. But in the early days when every penny had to be watched, I knew that each birth set back Sandy's plans

for the business. What tricks? Before Elsie went back, I would find out by hook or by crook.

Elsie was quiet for a long time then. I began to wonder if she was wishing me far enough; felt I was prying and was regretting her little bit of confidence. I was just thinking of making an excuse to leave her when she spoke, almost in a whisper. 'I had a little boy. I called him Alain. It was near enough to "Allen" to remind me of home.'

The tears were welling up in her lovely eyes again. I moved to take her in my arms. 'What happened to him, Elsie? Don't upset yourself, please. You're safe here with us. You can stay as long as you like. Let me fetch you one of your pills. Then you can rest.'

'There is no rest for me, Jessie, ever.' Her voice was rising again and she clung to me feverishly. I wondered desperately what to do. Then I heard Sandy's step on the landing. He tapped on the door and I eased myself out of Elsie's grasp to open it.

'Is everything all right?' he asked anxiously. I drew the door to behind me and quickly told him what had happened.

'Let me speak to her,' he said, opening the door and walking in.

Sandy sat down calmly beside Elsie, took her hands in his and said, 'Now lass, I think you've reached breaking point. It's time you got it all off your chest. And what better person to tell than Jessie, eh? I tell you what I'll do. I'll bring up a tray with the spirit kettle, your cups and a tin of biscuits. You can sit there all night if you like - there's the gas fire if you need it - and just blether till the cows come home. You've been bottling it all up too long by the look of you. What d'you say, lass?'



Elsie lifted her head with the grace that had characterized her as a girl. 'I think you are an angel, Sandy.' Then she spoiled it with an unladylike hiccough which sent him off laughing.

The little flame of the spirit kettle fascinated us both for a while. In silence I infused the tea and waited for it to strengthen. It was only when we sat back in the comfortable armchairs that had been moved to Elsie's room that she spoke. 'I do not know where to begin, Jessie . . . You will be shocked . . . upset . . .'

'Don't worry about me. I'll be fine.'

'Yes,' she said reflectively, 'you have a deep well of joy to draw on.'

'What a nice way of putting it, Elsie,' I said.

'It's difficult, Jessie, when I think back . . . a lot of scenes jumbled up, really, and I'm acting in them.'

'Well, tell me any way you like,' I said.