

EDITH BLACK

A PRINCESS IN
CALICO

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Edith Ferguson Black

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Chapter I

Sleepy Hollow

She stood at her bedroom window before going downstairs to take up the burden of a new day. She was just seventeen, but they did not keep any account of anniversaries at Hickory Farm. The sun had given her a loving glance as he lifted his bright old face above the horizon, but her father was too busy and careworn to remember, and, since her mother had gone away, there was no one else. She had read of the birthdays of other girls, full of strange, sweet surprises, and tender thoughts – but those were girls with mothers. A smile like a stray beam of sunshine drifted over her troubled young face, at the thought of the second Mrs Harding stopping for one instant in her round of ponderous toil to note the fact that one of her family had reached another milestone in life's journey. Certainly not on washing day, when every energy was absorbed in the elimination of impurity from her household linen, and life looked grotesque and hazy through clouds of soapy steam.

She heard her father now putting on the heavy pots of water, and then watched him cross the chip-yard to the barn. How bent and old he looked. Did he ever repent of his step? she wondered. Life could not be much to him any more than it was to her, and he had known her mother! Oh! why could he not have waited? She would soon have been old enough to keep house for him.

The minister had spoken the day before of a heaven where people were, presumably, to find their height of enjoyment in an eternity of rest. She supposed that was the best of it. Old Mrs Goodenough was always sighing for rest, and Deacon Croaker prayed every week to be set free from the trials and tribulations of this present evil world, and brought into everlasting peace. An endless passivity seemed a dreary outlook to her active soul, which was sighing to plume its cramped wings, and soar among the endless possibilities of earth: it seemed strange that there should be no wonders to explore in heaven. Well, death was sure, anyway, and after all there was nothing in life – her life – but hard work, an ever-recurring round of the same thing. She thought she could have stood it better if there had been variety. Death was sure to come, sometime, but people lived to be eighty, and she was so very young. Still, perhaps monotony might prove as fatal as heart failure. She thought it would with her – she was so terribly tired. Ever since she could remember she had looked out of this same window as the sun rose, and wondered if something would happen to her as it did to other girls, but the day went past in the same dull routine. So many plates to wash, and the darning basket seemed to grow larger each year, and the babies were so heavy. She had read somewhere that 'all earnest, pure, unselfish men who lived their lives well, helped to form the hero – God let none of them be wasted. A thousand unrecorded patriots helped to make Wellington.' It seemed to her Wellington had the best of it.

'Help me git dressed, P'liney,' demanded Lemuel, her youngest step-brother, from his trundle bed. 'You're loiterin'. Why ain't you down helping mar? Mar'll be awful cross with you. She always is wash days. Hi! you'll git it!' and he endeavoured to suspend himself from a chair by his braces.

'Come and get your face washed, Lemuel. Now don't wiggle. You know you've got to say your prayers before you can go down.'

'Can't be bovered,' retorted that worthy, as he squirmed into his jacket like an eel, and darted past her. 'I'm as hungry as Wobinson Crusoe, an' I'm goin' to tell mar how you're loiterin'.'

She followed him sadly. She had forgotten to say her own.

‘Fifteen minutes late,’ said Mrs Harding severely, as she entered the kitchen. ‘You’ll hev to be extry spry to make up. There’s pertaters to be fried, an’ the children’s lunches to put up, an’ John Alexander’s lost his jography – I believe that boy’d lose his head if it twarn’t glued to his shoulders. There’s a button off Stephen’s collar, an’ Susan Ann wants her hair curled, an’ Polly’s frettin’ to be taken up. It beats me how that child does fret – I believe I’ll put her to sleep with you after this – I’m that beat out I can hardly stand.’

‘Here, Leander, go and call your father, or you’ll be late for school again, an’ your teacher’ll be sending in more complaints. ‘Bout all them teachers is good for anyway – settin’ like ladies twiddling at the leaves of a book, an’ thinkin’ themselves somethin’ fine because they know a few words of Latin, an’ can figure with an x . Algebray is all very fine in its way, but I guess plain arithmetic is good enough for most folks. It’s all I was brought up on, an’ the multiplication table has kept me on a level with the majority.’

Pauline smiled to herself, as she cut generous slices of pumpkin pie to go with the doughnuts and bread and butter in the different dinner pails. That was just what tired her; being ‘on a level with the majority.’

The long morning wore itself away. Pauline toiled bravely over the endless array of pinafores which the youthful Hardings managed to make unpresentable in a week.

‘Monotony even in gingham!’ she murmured; for Polly’s were all of pink check, Lemuel’s blue, and Leander’s a dull brown.

‘Saves sortin’,’ had been the brief response, when she had suggested varying the colours in order to cultivate the æsthetic instinct in the wearers.

‘But, Mrs Harding,’ she remonstrated, ‘they say now that it is possible for even wall-paper to lower the moral tone of a child, and lead to crime – ’

Her step-mother turned on her a look of withering scorn.

‘If your hifalutin’ people mean to say that if I don’t get papering to suit their notions, I will make my boys thieves an’ liars, then it’s well for us the walls is covered with sensible green paint that’ll wash. To-morrow is killing time, an’ next week we must try out the tallow. You can be as æsthetic as you’re a mind to with the head-cheese and candles.’

Pauline never attempted after that to elevate the moral tone of her step-brothers.

Her father came in at supper-time with a letter. He handed it over to her as she sat beside him.

‘It’s from your uncle Robert, my dear, in Boston. His folks think it’s time they got to know their cousin.’

‘Well, I hope they’re not comin’ trailin’ down here with their city airs,’ said Mrs Harding shortly. ‘I’ve got enough people under my feet as it is.’

‘You needn’t worry, mother, I don’t think Sleepy Hollow would suit Robert’s family – they’re pretty lively, I take it, and up with the times. They’d find us small potatoes not worth the hoeing.’ He sighed as he spoke. Did he remember how Pauline’s mother had drooped and died from this very dulness? Was he glad to have her child escape?

‘Well, I don’t see how there’s any other way for them to get acquainted,’ retorted his wife. ‘Pawliney can’t be spared to go trapesing up to Boston. Her head’s as full of nonsense now as an egg is of meat, an’ she wouldn’t know a broom from a clothes-wringer after she’d been philandering round a couple of months with people that are never satisfied unless they’re peeking into something they can’t understand.’

‘But I guess we’ll have to spare Pauline,’ said Mr Harding. ‘She has been a good girl, and she deserves a holiday.’ He patted Pauline’s hand kindly.

‘Oh, of course!’ sniffed Mrs Harding in high dudgeon; ‘some folks must always have what they cry for. I can be kep’ awake nights with the baby, and work like a slave in the day time, but that doesn’t signify as long as Pawliney gets to her grand relations.’

‘Well, well, wife,’ said Mr Harding soothingly, ‘things won’t be as bad as you think for. You can get Martha Spriggs to help with the chores, and the children will soon be older. Young folks must have a turn, you know, and I shall write to Robert to-night and tell him Pawliney will be along shortly – that is if you’d like to go, my dear?’

Pauline turned on him a face so radiant that he was satisfied, and the rest of the meal was taken in silence. Mrs Harding knew when her husband made up his mind about a thing she could not change him, so she said no more, but Pauline felt she was very angry.

As for herself, she seemed to walk on air. At last, after all these years, something had happened! She stepped about the dim kitchen exultantly. Could this be the same girl who had found life intolerable only two hours before? Now the Aladdin wand of kindly fortune had opened before her dazzled eyes a mine of golden possibilities. At last she would have a chance to breathe and live. She arranged the common, heavy ware on the shelves with a strange sense of freedom. She would be done with dish-washing soon. She even found it in her heart to pity her step-mother, who was giving vent to her suppressed wrath in mighty strokes of her pudding-stick through a large bowl of buckwheat batter. She was not going to Boston.

When the chores were done, she caught up the fretful Polly and carried her upstairs, saying the magic name over softly to herself. She even found it easy to be patient with Lemuel as he put her through her nightly torture before he fell into the arms of Morpheus. She did not mind much if Polly was wakeful – she knew she should never close her eyes all night. The soft spring air floated in through the open window, and she heard the birds twitter and the frogs peep: she heard Abraham Lincoln, the old horse that she used to ride to water before she grew big enough to work, whinney over his hay; and Goliath, the young giant that had come to take his place in the farm work, answer him sonorously: the dog barked lazily as a nighthawk swept by, and in the distant hen-yard she heard a rooster crow. Her pity grew, until it rested like a benison upon all her humble friends, for they must remain in Sleepy Hollow, and she was going away.

Chapter II

A Ten-Dollar Bill

‘I suppose you’ll be wanting some finery, little girl,’ said Mr Harding the next morning as he pushed away his chair from the breakfast table. ‘Dress is the first consideration, isn’t it, with women?’

‘I don’t know about the finery, father,’ and Pauline laughed a little. ‘I expect I shall be satisfied with the essentials.’

Mr Harding crossed the room to an old-fashioned secretary which stood in one corner. Coming back, he held out to her a ten-dollar bill. ‘Will this answer? Money is terrible tight just now, and the mortgage falls due next week. It’s hard work keeping the wolf away these dull times.’

Pauline forced her lips to form a ‘Thank you,’ as she put the bank-note in her pocket, and then began silently to clear the table, her thoughts in a tumultuous whirl. Ten dollars! Her father’s hired man received a dollar a day. She had been working hard for years, and had received nothing but the barest necessities in the way of clothing, purchased under Mrs Harding’s economical eye. When Martha Spriggs came to take her place she would have her regular wages. Were hired helpers the only ones whose labour was deemed worthy of reward? Dresses and hats and boots and gloves. Absolute essentials with a vengeance, and ten dollars to cover the whole!

‘You can have Abraham Lincoln and the spring waggon this afternoon, if you want to go to the village for your gewgaws.’

‘Very well, father.’

‘I don’t suppose you’ll rest easy till you’ve made the dollars fly. That’s the way with girls, eh? As long as they can have a lot of flimsy laces and ribbons and flowers they’re as happy as birds. Well, well, young folks must have their fling, I suppose. I hope you’ll enjoy your shopping, my dear,’ and Mr Harding started for the barn, serene in the consciousness that he had made his daughter happy in the ability to purchase an unlimited supply of the unnecessary things which girls delight in.

‘You are a grateful piece, I must say!’ remarked her step-mother, as she administered some catnip tea to the whining Polly. ‘I haven’t seen the colour of a ten-dollar bill in as many years, and you put it in your pocket as cool as a cucumber, and go about looking as glum as a herring. Who’s going to do the clothes, I’d like to know? I can’t lay this child out of my arms for a minute. I believe she’s sickening for a fever, and then perhaps your fine relations won’t be so anxious to see you coming. For my part, I wouldn’t be in such a hurry to knuckle to people who waited seventeen years to find whether I was in the land of the living before they said, “How d’ye do.” But then I always was proud-spirited. I despise meachin’ folks.’

‘I guess I can get most of the ironing done this morning, if you’ll see to the dinner,’ said Pauline, as she put the irons on the stove and went into another room for the heavy basket of folded clothes.

Dresses and hats and boots and gloves! The words kept recurring to her inner consciousness with a persistent regularity. She wondered what girls felt like who could buy what they did not need. She thought it must be like Heaven, but not Deacon Croaker’s kind; that looked less attractive than ever this morning.

As she passed Mrs Harding’s chair Polly put up her hands to be taken, but her mother caught her back.

‘No, no, Pawliney hasn’t got any more use for plain folks, Polly. She’s going to do herself proud shoppin’, so she can go to Boston and strut about like a frilled peacock. You’ll have to be satisfied with your mother, Polly; Pawliney doesn’t care anything about you now.’

Pauline laughed bitterly to herself.

‘A frilled peacock, with a ten-dollar outfit!’

She began the interminable pinafores. The sun swept up the horizon and laughed at her so broadly through the open window that her cheeks grew flushed and uncomfortable.

Lemuel burst into the room in riotous distress with a bruised knee, the result of his attempt to imitate the Prodigal Son, which had ended in an ignominious head-over-heels tumble into the midst of his swinish friends. This caused a delay, for he had to be hurried out to the back stoop and divested of garments as odorous, if not as ragged, as those of his prototype. Then he must be immersed in a hot bath, his knee bound up, re clothed in a fresh suit, and comforted with bread and molasses.

She toiled wearily on. The room grew almost unbearable as her step-mother made up the fire preparatory to cooking the noontide meal, and Polly wailed dismally from her cot. The youthful Prodigal appeared again in the doorway, his ready tears had made miniature deltas over his molasses-begrimed countenance, his lower lip hung down in an impotent despair.

‘What’s the matter now, Lemuel?’

‘I want my best shoes, an’ a wing on my finger, an’ the axe to kill the fatted calf.’

Would the basket never be empty? Her head began to throb, and she felt as if her body were an ache personified. The mingled odours of corned beef and cabbage issued from one of the pots and permeated the freshly ironed clothes. She drew a long, deep breath of disgust. At least in Boston she would be free from the horrors of ‘boiled dinner.’

Her scanty wardrobe was finished at last, and she stood waiting for Abraham Lincoln and the spring waggon to carry her to the station. A strange tenderness towards her old environment came over her, as she stood on the threshold of the great unknown. She looked lovingly at the cows, lazily chewing their cud in the sunshine; she felt sorry for her step-mother, as she strove to woo slumber to Polly’s wakeful eyes with the same lullaby which had done duty for the whole six; she even found it in her heart to kiss Lemuel, who, with his ready talent for the unusual, was busily cramming mud paste into the seams of the little trunk which held her worldly all. She looked at it with contemptuous pity.

‘You poor old thing! You’ll feel as small as I shall among the saratogas and the style. Well, I’ll be honest from the start and tell them that the only thing we’re rich in is mortgages. I guess they’ll know without the telling. I wonder if they’ll be ashamed of me?’

Her father came and lifted the trunk into the back of the waggon, and they started along the grass-bordered road to the station. He began recalling the city as he remembered it.

‘You’ll have to go to Bunker Hill, of course, and the Common, and be sure and look out for the statues, they’re everywhere. Lincoln freeing the slaves – that’s the best one to my thinking, and that’s down in Cornhill, if I remember right. My, but that’s a place! Mind you hold tight to your cousins. The streets, and the horses, and the people whirl round so, it’s enough to make you lose your head. Well, well, I wouldn’t mind going along with you to see the sights.’

He bought her ticket, and secured her a comfortable seat, then he said, ‘God bless you,’ and went away.

Pauline looked after him wonderingly. He had never said it to her before. Perhaps it was a figure of speech which people reserved for travelling. She supposed there was always the danger of a possible accident. Ah! if they could only have started off together, as he said, and never gone back to Sleepy Hollow any more!

Chapter III **Fairyland**

To the day of her death Pauline never forgot the sense of satisfied delight with which she felt herself made a member of her uncle's household. Her three cousins – Gwendolyn, Russell, and Belle – had greeted her cordially as soon as the train drew up in a station which, for size and grandeur, surpassed her wildest dreams, and then escorted her between a bewildering panorama of flashing lights, brilliant shop windows, swiftly moving cars, and people in an endless stream to another depot, for her Uncle Robert resided in the suburbs.

They were waiting to welcome her at the entrance of their lovely home, her Uncle Robert and his wife. With one swift, comprehensive glance she took it all in. The handsome house in its brilliant setting of lawns and trees, the wide verandah with its crimson Mount Washington rockers, luxurious hammocks, and low table covered with freshly-cut magazines, the pleasant-faced man who was her nearest of kin, and his graceful wife in a tea-gown of soft summer silk with rich lace about her throat and wrists, her cousins in their dainty muslins, and Russell in his fresh summer suit. Here, at least, were people who knew what it was to live!

'So we have really got our little country blossom transplanted,' said her uncle, as he kissed her warmly. 'I have so often begged your father to let you come to us before, but he always wrote that you could not be spared.'

A hot flush burnt its way up over her cheeks and brow. And he had let her think all this time that they had not cared! Her own father! He might at least have trusted her!

She started, for her uncle was saying: —

'This is your Aunt Rutha, my dear,' and turned to be clasped in tender arms, and hear a sweet voice whisper the all-sufficient introduction: —

'I loved your mother.'

And then she had been taken upstairs by the lively Belle to refresh herself after her journey, and prepare for dinner, which had been delayed until her arrival.

The dinner itself was a revelation. The snowy table with its silver dishes and graceful centre-piece of hot-house blooms, the crystal sparkling in the rosy glow cast by silken-shaded, massively carved lamps, the perfect, noiseless serving, and the bright conversation which flowed freely, little hindered by the different courses of soup and fish, and game and ices – conversation about things that were happening in the world which seemed to be growing larger every minute, apt allusions by Mr Davis, lively sallies by Belle, and quotations by Russell from authors who seemed to be household friends, so highly were they held in reverence.

Afterwards there had been music, Russell at the piano, and Gwendolyn and Belle with their violins, and she had sat upon the sofa by the gracious, new-found friend, who stroked her rough hand gently with her white jewelled fingers, and talked to her softly, in the pauses of the music, of what her mother was like as a girl. Verily, Aunt Rutha had a wonderful way of making one feel at home.

She laughed to herself as the thought came to her. She felt more at home than she had ever done before in her life. She remembered reading somewhere that the children of men were often brought up under alien conditions, like ducklings brooded over by a mother hen, but as soon as a chance was given, they flew to their native element and the former things were as though they had not been. An inborn instinct of refinement made this new life immediately congenial. But – could she ever forget the weary conditions of Sleepy Hollow? She frequently heard in imagination the clatter of the dishes and the rough romping of the children as they noisily trooped to bed. Her nerves quivered as she listened to Mrs Harding shrilly droning the worn-out lullaby to the sleepless Polly, and Lemuel demanding to have *Jack the Giant Killer* told to him six times in succession. It seemed to her the

life, in its bare drudgery, had worn deep seams into her very soul, like country roads in spring-time, whose surface is torn apart in gaping wounds and unsightly ruts by heavy wheels and frost and rain.

She looked at her cousins with a feeling nearly akin to envy. Their lives had no contrasts. Always this beautiful comradeship with father and mother; and Aunt Rutha was so lovely – she stopped abruptly. She would not change mothers. No, no, she would be loyal, even in thought, to the pale, tired woman, whom she could remember kissing her passionately in the twilight, while bitter tears rained on her childish, upturned face. She would not let the demon of discontent spoil her visit. She would put by and forget while she enjoyed this wonderful slice of pleasure that had come to her. There was just as much greed in her wanting happiness wholesale as in Lemuel's crying for the whole loaf of gingerbread; the only difference was in the measure of their capacity.

'What is it, dear?' asked Aunt Rutha, with an amused smile. 'You have been in the brownest of studies.'

She looked up at her brightly.

'I believe it was a briar tangle, Aunt Rutha, of the worst kind; but I shall see daylight soon, thank you.'

Mrs Davis laid her hand on her husband's arm.

'Your penknife, Robert. Our little girl here is tied up in a Gordian knot, and we must help to set her free.'

Her uncle laughed as he opened the pearl-handled weapon.

'If good will can take the place of skill, I'll promise to cut no arteries.' Then he added more gravely, 'But you have nothing more to do with knots, my dear, of any kind. You belong to us now.'

They discussed her a little in kindly fashion after she had gone to her room for the night.

'The child has the air of a princess,' said Mrs Davis thoughtfully. 'She holds herself wonderfully, in spite of her rustic training, but I suppose blood always tells'; and she looked over at her husband with a smile.

'She has wonderful powers of adaptability, too,' said Gwendolyn. 'I watched her at dinner, and she never made a single slip, although I imagine there were several things that were new to her beside the finger-glasses.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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