

BAIRD JEAN KATHERINE

THAT LITTLE GIRL OF MISS
ELIZA'S: A STORY FOR
YOUNG PEOPLE

Jean Baird

**That Little Girl of Miss Eliza's:
A Story for Young People**

«Public Domain»

Baird J.

That Little Girl of Miss Eliza's: A Story for Young People / J. Baird —
«Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	9
CHAPTER III	13
CHAPTER IV	16
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	19

That Little Girl of Miss Eliza's: A Story for Young People

CHAPTER I

“The poorest farming land in all the country,” someone called it. “The best crop of stones and stumps, I ever saw,” someone else had said. Everyone smiled and drove on, and Shintown and its people passed from their knowledge.

“Shintown? Where in the name of goodness did they get such a name?” the elderly gentleman in the touring car asked his companion.

“Have to use your shins to get here. It used to be that Shank’s mare was the only one that could travel the miserable roads. They were mere foot-paths. Even the railroads have shot clear of it. See over there.”

There was truth in the words. Shintown, which was no town at all, but a few isolated farmhouses, looked down from its heights on one side upon the main line of the Susquehanna Valley, five miles away. On the other side, at a little more than half the distance, the branch of the W. N. P. and P. wound along the edge of the river. Both roads avoided Shintown as though it had the plague. The name was quite enough to discourage anyone. Nature had done its best for the place, the people had done their worst. It stood in the valley, and yet on a higher elevation than the country adjacent, the mountain being twenty miles distant. It was as though a broad table had been set in a wide country, with the mountain peaks as decorous waiters standing at the outer edge.

The houses were sagging affairs. They were well enough at one time, but were now like a good intention gone wrong. The storm had beaten upon them for so many years that all trace of paint was gone. The chimneys sloped as far as the law of gravity allowed. Gates hung on one hinge, and the fences had the same angle as an old man suffering with lumbago.

The corners of the fields were weed-ridden. The farmers never had time to plow clear to the corners and turn plumb. The soil had as many stones as it had had twenty years before. The whole countryside was suffering from lack of ambition. Crops were small, and food and clothes were meager. The stock showed the same attributes. It was stunted, dwarfed, far from its natural efficiency in burden bearing, milk-giving or egg-laying.

There was one place not quite like this – the old Wells place at the cross roads. The house was neither so large, nor so rambling as the others. It stood deep among some old purple beeches, and in summer it had yellow roses clambering over one entire side. The color was peculiar, and marked its occupant and owner just a little different from other people in the community. Everyone conceded that point without a question. She was just a little different. The house was all in shades of golden brown; brown that suggested yellow when the sun shone. It was a color that not a man in Shintown or a painter at the Bend or Port would have thought of putting on a house. Who ever thought of painting a house anything but white with green shutters or a good, serviceable drab? Golden browns in several shades! Why, of course, the woman must be peculiar. She did the work herself too. She arose at daylight to paint the upper portion and she quit work when travel on the highway began.

That was another peculiarity which the countryside could not understand; a woman who could be independent enough to choose what color she would, in defiance of all set laws, and yet afraid to let folks see her climbing a ladder to the second story.

If peculiar means being different, Eliza Wells was that. She was thirty, and never blushed at it. She had even been known to mention her birthdays as “I was twenty-nine yesterday. How time

does fly!” And she said it after the manner of one who might have said, “To-morrow I set the old Plymouth Rock on a settin’ of Dominick eggs.”

But the country folk were kind enough and overlooked her not being as themselves. There was a knowing smile now and then, a sage nodding of the head. Now and then someone went as far as to say, “That’s Liza’s way. She never did act like other folks.”

Eliza knew she was peculiar and tried her best to be like those about her. She had never known any other kind of people; for she had been born and bred in the little place. But do as she could, her own self would break loose every now and then. In spite of her effort to be like other people, there were times when she could be nothing but her own unusual, individual self.

It was not that she admired the ways of life of the people about her. Had she done so, it might have been easier to have become like them. But she argued in this fashion: if all these hundred souls lived in one way and declared that to be the right way, then surely she was wrong, and her ideas had all gone awry somewhere; for one could not stand against a hundred.

The old Wells place had all the finger-marks of having a peculiar occupant. Hollyhocks all along the walk to the milk-house, nasturtiums climbing over a pile of rock; wistaria clinging to the trunk of a dead tree; wild cucumber vines on a trellis shielding the wood-pile and chip yard. In the recess of the old-fashioned front entrance were old blue bowls filled with nasturtiums.

The old blue delft had been in the family of Eliza’s grandmother Sampson for generations. Everybody knew it; but Eliza paraded them and seemed as proud of them as though they had just been purchased from Griffith’s “five and ten.” But she couldn’t fool the people of Shintown. They knew a thing or two and they were certain that the bowls were over a hundred years old.

On hot days, she ate on her kitchen porch, which she had enclosed with cotton fly-net, and she stuck a bunch of pansies in a teacup and had them beside her plate.

That was quite enough to show that she was peculiar. No one else in the country put flowers on the table. Indeed, no one raised them. What was the use? They weren’t good to eat.

But Eliza’s place was not a farm, else she could not have wasted so much time on worthless things. Two acres was all she owned, and she kept half of that in yard and flowers.

She would have had more room for garden if she would have cut down one or more of her purple beeches, but she would not do that. When Sam Houston suggested it to her, saying in his blunt way, “If you’d plant less of the ‘dern foolishness,’ you’d have more room for cabbages,” she replied, with a merry glint in her eye, “Sometimes, I think cabbages is the worst foolishness of all.”

Sam could make no reply to that. A man couldn’t reason with a woman who had no more sense than that.

Eliza Wells could afford to be a little different from anybody else. In the vernacular of the country, “she was well-fixed.” This meant not that she had millions, or even a hundred thousand, but there was money enough out at interest to bring her in fifteen dollars each month. This, with her garden truck and home, made her independent.

To have money in the bank was a distinguishing mark of rank. Not a soul at Shintown except Eliza could boast so much. Sam Houston was the only one in the countryside who had tales to tell of a father and a grandfather who lived on interest money.

Her financial independence made Eliza’s peculiarities a little more bearable. They were the idiosyncracies of the bloated capitalist.

Eliza drove to the Bend the first of each quarter to draw her interest money. She wore a black silk dress and a little bonnet. How she hated the stiff shininess of black silk. How miserably awkward she felt with the caricature of black lace and purple pansies, which custom called a bonnet, on her head. But she had been reared to believe that black silk was the only proper dress for a woman, no longer young, and the days after twenty years were always placed to the credit of age.

So she wore her black silk, although she saw nothing pretty in it. The women of Shintown envied her the possession of such a mark of gentility and declared that Eliza had a good bit of style for a woman of her age, and after a fashion all their own were proud of her.

She always drove Old Prince when she went to the Bend. There was always a little shopping before she came home. Quarter day fell on the first of July. The sun was fairly blazing upon the stretch of dusty road which knew no shadow of tree.

Miss Eliza was anxious to get home. Her hands were sweating in their heavy gloves. Not a breeze was stirring. The stiff black silk was not an easy or comfortable dress for a hot day. Yet she let Old Prince take his time. The flies bothered him considerably, and he shied like a young colt at every object in the road. He had not been out of the stable-yard for a week and what energy had been left to him had been bottled up for this trip to town.

In his youth, some years before, he had been a vicious animal which only a man with a steady nerve and strong hand could manage. But age had made him tractable. He went home at a steady gait with the reins hanging loose on his back, except when Eliza shook them to dislodge an annoying fly.

As they turned the bend of the road at Farwell, Old Prince shied suddenly and turned the wheels deep in the ditch. Eliza steadied herself and seized the reins. "There, old fellow, go quiet. There hain't nothing here to disturb you."

Her words sounded brave enough, yet she glanced apprehensively about. The new railroads had brought their following of tramps, and Eliza was fearful. She peered into the clump of elder bushes which grew up along the hillside. It was a beautiful rather than a fearful sight which met her eyes. A big woman with great braids of yellow hair sat in the shade of the underbrush. Eliza did not notice that her dress was exceedingly shabby. She did notice, however, that a little child lay in her arms. Both were sound asleep as though utterly exhausted by their travels.

They were strangers. Eliza knew that at a glance. She knew all the residents of the valley. A small traveling bag lay beside the woman. Her hand resting lightly upon it, as though even in sleep she would keep it in custody.

Miss Eliza spoke to Prince who would persist in frolicking and garotting about like a colt. The public road was not a safe sleeping place for a woman and child. Eliza recognized her duty. Leaning forward, she touched the woman's hand lightly with her whip. She did this several times before the woman's eyes opened.

"I've been trying to waken you," said Eliza. "The road is not a safe place to sleep."

The woman looked wonderingly about, yawned and rubbed her eyes. It was some minutes before she could get her bearings. When her eyes fell on the child, she smiled and nodded back at Eliza and then got upon her feet and began to put herself to rights.

"Where are you going?" asked Eliza.

The woman hesitated, puckered her brows and at last said, "I – I bane gone to Yameston."

"Foreign," said Eliza mentally. She had no idea where 'Yameston' was, but it was reasonable to suppose that the woman was cutting across country to take the flyer at the Port where it stopped to change engine and crews.

"It's no place for a woman to rest. Tramps are thicker than huckleberries. Climb in and I'll drive you and your baby part of the way."

The woman could not understand, but she did grasp the meaning of Miss Eliza's moving to the opposite side of the seat and reaching forth her hand to help her get into the carriage.

When they were safely seated, Miss Eliza touched Old Prince with the whip. At that instant, the oncoming flyer, as it entered the yard, whistled like a veritable demon. The two were too much for the old horse, who had been a thoroughbred in his time and had never known the touch of a whip. He reared on his hind feet, and then with a mad plunge went tearing down the road which was hemmed in on one side by the hills, and whose outer edge lay on the rocky bluffs of the river.

Miss Eliza held to the reins until they cut into the flesh. Bracing herself against the dash board, she kept Old Prince to the middle of the road. Just as she felt sure that she could manage him, the rein on the hillside snapped. The tension on the other side turned the animal toward the edge of the bank. Eliza dropped the useless rein, seized the child in her arms and held it close to her breast, hoping by her own body to protect it from the fall. It was all the work of a second. She shut her eyes even as she did this.

CHAPTER II

Eliza never could tell how long it was before she opened her eyes again. She was conscious at first of the sun beating down upon her face. Bewildered she opened her eyes only to close them again quickly against the unbearable light of the sky at midday. She tried to move, but her muscles were bound. A delicious sense of languor was again stealing over her, when she moved her hand slightly and felt water running over it. This aroused her again, and set her thoughts in motion. Little by little it all came back to her; her drive, the woman and child and the run-away horse. She knew now where she was. She need not open her eyes to see. She was lying at the foot of the stone wall at Paddy's Run hill. She could hear the noise of running water. She thought of these things in a dreamy, far-off fashion as though it were something she might have read sometime. The child! Then she realized the awfulness of what had happened. Had she killed them both! She did not dare think of anything so horrible. She lay quite still, straining every nerve to listen for some sound of life. She heard it at last. It was the most beautiful sound she had ever heard in all her life. A low gurgly coo and then the touch of baby fingers on her face.

"Pitty ady – det up. Pitty ady, don't seep so long." The laughing dimpled face of the child looked down at her. It had escaped then. It was with a delicious feeling of thankfulness that she closed her eyes, not to open them again for several hours.

She was back in her own home then, lying on the old mahogany davenport with all the neighbors for miles about bending over her. She could hear Sam Houston holding forth in the kitchen. She listened, and there came to her in a listless sort of way that Sam always was a brag.

"I was just settin' out to walk down to the office," he was saying, "and when I came on to the road, who should I see but that old rascal of a Prince come walking along with one shaft hanging to his heels and the reins floppin' down on his side. He looked as quiet as a lamb, for all the world as though he had been put to grazin' instead of up to some devilment. I tell you right here, it didn't take me long to know that something was up. I called Jim-boy, and off we started as fast as legs could carry us, and sure enough there the hull three of them lay –"

"Three! Three! Three of them!" The words kept running off in Eliza's mind. There were three – herself, the baby and – she could not remember who the third was. Then she did remember. Like a flash all was clear. She raised herself and was about to get up.

"There – there, Liza, you mustn't." Mrs. Kilgore would have forced her back on the pillows.

"I must get up. There's nothing at all the matter with me." Pushing aside the detaining hands, she stood upon her feet. For an instant she was a little giddy, but she steadied herself. Her muscles ached as she moved. Her black silk waist had been cut open the full length of the sleeve and she saw that her arm was black and blue. It was badly swollen. She could move it though, and bruises will soon heal.

"Where's the woman – the woman who was with me?" she asked. She looked about on the faces. Every woman in Shintown was there. Old Granny Moyer sitting hunched up in the corner, using snuff and gloating. Mrs. Kilgore, bustling about with liniments and medicine bottles, her face radiant with the happiness of waiting upon the sick. From the room beyond came the heavier tones of men's voices. None of the women had attempted to answer Eliza's question. Her head was whirling so that she forgot in an instant that she had asked it. She listened to the voices from the parlor. Then, with all the energy of which she was capable, she moved quickly across the room and entered what the countryside termed 'the parlor.' This room was one of the things which Eliza disliked. She never said so. She never gave her thoughts tangible form even to herself. She simply avoided the room because she never felt at ease or comfortable when she sat within it.

There was a heavy Brussels carpet with bold design in bright colors. The chairs had backs as stiff as a poker. They were upholstered in red plush with ball fringe everywhere it could be stuck on.

The walls were made hideous with life-sized crayon portraits. Chenille curtains were draped at the windows and a rope portière impeded the opening and closing of the door. A large marble-topped table stood in the center of the room. It was all hideous enough even if the odor of camphor and moth balls had not been in the air. It was an awful example of clinging to customs which are hideous.

Eliza never could sit there. She always felt irritated and fussy whenever she put it to rights, but yet she had not reached the stage of advancement which seeks the cause and removes it.

Bracing herself against the jamb of the door, she raised her aching, bruised hand and pushed aside the rope drapery. The center-table with its marble top had been removed from its accustomed place and something else was there.

Eliza stood for a moment to look about her. Squire Stout stood by, leaning on his cane. He was a little shriveled-up creature with snowy hair. His lips were thin and cruel. There was the air of an autocrat, a demagogue about him. Near him was Doctor Dullmer, whose face even now had lost nothing of its helpful, cheery, optimistic expression. There were other men in the group. They had all been talking; but they ceased at the sight of Miss Eliza standing in the doorway.

“You?” exclaimed Doctor Dullmer, advancing and extending his arm for support. “What do you mean? You should be in bed!”

“I am all right. Just bruised. That is all.”

She clung to his arm as she moved toward the little group, which separated to make room for her as she advanced.

Then she saw why the center-table with its square marble top had been pushed to the wall. The woman lay there. Her beautiful yellow hair was coiled about her head like a golden crown. She looked so smiling and happy that Eliza could not feel one pang of sorrow for her. She bent over and smoothed the stranger's forehead.

“I wonder who she was,” she said at length.

“Don't you know?” the question came from every man there and from the group of women who had packed the narrow doorway. They were too fearful and too nervous to enter.

“No, I do not,” said Eliza. “I know neither her name nor her destination.”

“Sit down,” said Doctor Dullmer brusquely, pushing forward a chair and forcing her, none too gently, into it. She sat bolt upright and looked at the men about her. She forgot that her arm was aching with its bruises, and that a great cut near her temple, which the doctor had stitched, was making her head throb and tremble like an over-pressure of caged steam.

“But she was with you.” – “You were driving her.” “We supposed right along that she was some of your kin.”

Eliza shook her head. “I'll tell you how it happened so,” she began. “I never saw her – ”

“Don't talk about it now. Better wait until to-morrow, until you are better,” advised Doctor Dullmer.

“I must talk now. It's better to tell about it at once so there can be no misunderstanding. It will help me to get it off my mind.”

“Well, just as you please,” said he, but he drew a chair beside her and watched her closely. He alone realized that she was on the point of collapse which might come suddenly upon her. He thought only of her physical condition. He had not estimated the power of will which is able to put aside all physical discomfort and carry a thing through because it is right to do so.

So Eliza sat bolt upright in the stiff chair, hideous with its red plush upholstery, and related all that had happened the several hours before.

The men listened with a question at intervals. When the story was ended, Miss Eliza got upon her feet.

“You'll go to bed now,” said the doctor.

“Send everyone home but Mrs. Kilgore. I cannot rest with so many about me.”

Mrs. Kilgore had overheard the words and was already ridding the house of the neighbors.

“You’d better go, Granny. Your old man will want supper soon.”

“I think your baby would be crying for you, Mrs. Duden.”

“Hain’t you afraid to leave the twins alone in the house with matches and oil about?” So by dint of suggestion, she turned them all homeward and locked the door.

Miss Eliza went back to the davenport and, arranging the pillows, laid down her throbbing head and closed her eyes.

Mrs. Kilgore bustled about, closing doors and drawing shades. She was as happy as could be. She was in her element in the sick-room. She found thorough enjoyment in officiating at the house of sorrow. She drew down the corners of her mouth and assumed a doleful expression, but a pleased excitement showed itself in spite of all.

“Pitty adee – pittie adee.” A few toddling steps, and the child came close to the davenport where Eliza lay. Her baby hands rested lightly against the bandaged head.

“Pitty adee – hurted. Me’s sorry. Me kiss ’ou an ’ou get well.” Standing on tip-toe, she put her lips again and again against the bandage.

Miss Eliza trembled. A strange thrill went through her. She had never known much about children. She had been the only chick and child of her parents. She had not realized that a baby could be so sweet. A strange joy filled her at the touch of the lips. The term ‘Pretty lady’ found a responsive chord in her heart which vibrated. She had lived alone all her life. No one had ever touched lips to hers. No one had ever found her attractive or beautiful. For as many years as she could remember, no one had ever called her ‘pretty’. She did not think whether it were true or false. She accepted it as something new and delightful. She was a human being, though she had always been alone, and she craved affection just as every one of humanity does.

She drew the child close to her. It cuddled up as though it had known only love and tenderness and feared no one. At length it crawled up on the davenport and nestled close in her arms, with the little head on her breast. All the while, it kept up a prattle of sympathy for the ‘pitty adee who was hurted’ and the baby hands touched Eliza’s cheek lightly. So both fell asleep.

The news of the accident had spread quickly enough. Telegrams had flashed over the country and local newspapers sent reporters at once to secure particulars. Williamsburg was the nearest city of importance. *The Herald* was the daily with the largest circulation. It was always looking for a “scoop.”

When the telegrams came in telling of the accident, Morris was the only man in the outer office. McCoy nailed him at once.

“Get to Shintown as fast as you can. Find out everything. Write a column or two and get back before the press closes for the morning edition.”

Morris started. Until this time, he had written nothing but personals. He was eager to advance. This looked to him like a rung in the ladder. He would “make good” for himself and his paper. There was no passenger train due, but he caught a fast freight and “bummed” his way to the Bend and walked from there to Shintown.

He was admitted without question to the parlor of the old Wells place. The men had departed, leaving only a watcher beside the dead.

The boy took out his note-book and asked questions which the man who sat in waiting and Mrs. Kilgore eagerly answered. He looked at the woman with her mass of yellow hair about her head like a crown. He had been brought up inland. He knew little of that great wave of surging humanity which yearly seek our shores in search of a home. He had seen the German type with fair skin and yellow hair. It did not come to him that a far northern country had these characteristics intensified.

The presses closed at midnight. He had four hours to reach the city and have his copy ready. He fired questions rapidly, and wrote while the answers came. Then he fairly ran down the country road to the Bend where he caught the late flyer.

It was almost eleven when he began to make copy. Suddenly he stopped. He had neglected to ask the sex of the child who had been made motherless by the accident. He paused an instant. He had no time to find out. He would use a reporter's privilege.

The next morning's edition of the *Herald* came out with triple headings on its front page.

Accident at Village of Shintown

One Killed – Two Badly Hurt

A German Woman Who Cannot be Identified

Killed by Runaway Horse. Her Little

Son in Care of Strangers

Then followed an incorrect account of the accident. The nationality of the woman, her relation to the child, the sex and age of the latter were so far removed from the truth, that people hundreds of miles away read in eager hope, only to lay the paper aside, disappointed that this was not she for whom they were searching.

CHAPTER III

No one came to ask concerning the strangers, and she was laid away in the Wells burial lot, and Miss Eliza paid the bills that necessarily followed.

Mrs. Kilgore and Dr. Dullmer, with Squire Stout standing by and looking on like a bird of ill omen, went over every article of the attire of woman and child in the hope of finding some means of identification. There was a small traveling bag of fine leather. It contained the articles necessary for a journey of several days. There was a small drinking cup, a child's coat, comb and brush. There were neither tickets nor checks, nor a cent of money. This led Miss Eliza to believe that somewhere there must have been a second purse. She went with the men over the scene of accident and retraced every step from the time she had first seen the woman sleeping in the shade of the bushes. But nothing was found to help them out of the unfortunate situation. Still, they believed that checks and tickets were somewhere. A tramp might have picked them up, or some dishonest, careless person found and retained possession of them. But after a careful search, all hope in that direction was given up.

The dead woman's clothes were ordinary. A coat-suit and shirt-waist of cheap material, underwear with a bit of hand-made lace of the old-fashioned kind. Her hat was cheap and rather tawdry; but everything about her was clean and whole. All gave the appearance of her being a self-respecting person in poor circumstances.

Two things belied this, however. The dress which the little child wore and a second one in the traveling case were exquisite in quality and handiwork. The little petticoats were dainty and showed expenditure both of money and good taste. The little beauty pins which fastened the dress were solid gold with the monogram E. L.

In the traveling case was a small box containing several quaint rings and a brooch.

Miss Eliza knew little of jewelry. The people with whom she had been reared had never been financially able to indulge themselves along this line and had consequently put upon it the ban of their disapproval. Her experience had been so limited that she knew no values. The articles were rings and pins, and were pretty. That was as far as she gave them thought. They had no dollar mark attached to them.

There was only one course left to her to follow. She put every article which the child wore, the traveling case and all its contents safely away with the few legal documents and valuables she possessed. She had the business instinct and forethought sufficient to mark each one, and to write a full letter of explanation as to how they came into her possession.

"You're taking a heap of trouble," said Mrs. Kilgore sadly. She had been following Miss Eliza over the house, always keeping a few steps behind her. She put on a big, green-checked apron when she dressed in the morning, and wore it until she prepared for bed at night. She never took it off at other times unless she had an errand to the store or post-office. Then she merely removed the work-marked one for that which was fresh from the iron.

She always had a broom in her hand. She followed in the footsteps of Eliza and brushed up after her, or stopped to pick up a thread or bit of lint, or straightened out a misplaced book, or flicked away a bit of dust with the tail of her apron.

This gave the impression that Mrs. Kilgore was a conscientious, indefatigable housewife who busied herself from morning until night with duties. It was all in appearances. Her house was a litter. Garments hung from parlor to kitchen, from attic to cellar, at every place where a nail might be driven in wall, beam or door.

She sighed and looked doleful and "put upon" every time she stooped to pick up a stray bit of lint, but deep in her soul she was happy. She was posing as an over-worked martyr and was not doing enough to tire herself. She was getting barrels of credit for a tin cup of effort.

"You're taking a heap of trouble," she repeated. "It's more than I'd take."

“I’m taking a little now to save a great deal for some one when I’m not here. The time may come when the girl’s own kin may be found. I want things to be in order so that they’ll not doubt that she’s their own. I’m of the opinion that she belongs to folks that are something. Her little white dress is enough to make me think that. Sometime, somebody will be coming along to look her up.”

This was a new idea to Mrs. Kilgore. It appealed to the sentimental side of her nature. In her mind’s eye, she pictured the child’s kin appearing in splendor and bearing her away with them. Another element of the case presented itself to her. She paused in her “sweeping up” and looked at Miss Eliza. She looked at her in a new light.

“They may do a heap for you for being so good to her and burying her mother decent and respectable in your own folks’ lot and not in the poor field. They may do a heap for you.”

“I’m not thinking of that. I had a right to do what I did. It was the very least I could do, and I’ve got to provide for the little girl until some one comes for her. It was my fault that she’s dead. I hain’t finding fault with myself for asking her to ride back with me. Any Christian woman would have done the same; but I didn’t do right to touch the whip to Old Prince. That’s where I was at fault; but” – pensively, “who would have thought that an old worn-out brute like him could have had so much ginger in him. It was my fault at not knowing and not understanding a brute animal that I’d driven for six years. No; I’ll be good to the child – as good as I can be. I’ve hurt her a powerful lot by taking her mother from her. I’ll do what I can to make up for it. It won’t be for long. Her kin will come to claim her.”

Had Eliza not felt responsible, she could have been nothing but good to the child. Mothers of the locality fixed the age of the little girl at about three. Others placed it as high as five. There she was dropped in among them without a name or even a birthday. She was a well-formed, beautiful child with brown ringlets clinging about her little plump neck; and eyes matching in color the blue of the midsummer sky. She was good-tempered and healthy. She smiled from the time she awoke until she fell asleep from sheer weariness. She prattled and hummed little tunes, only a few of the words of which she could remember. She followed Eliza wherever the woman went, and crawled into her lap and cuddled close to her the instant she seated herself. “Pity adee” was the only title she knew for Miss Eliza. After a few days, the name was fixed: “Adee.” The little girl could not be persuaded to call her foster-parent by any other name. A child can manage to thrive and yet have no birthday; but a name it must have. For several days Eliza referred to the stranger as “the little girl.” This was not satisfactory.

“She must be called something. It’s simply heathenish not to have a name of some kind. I’ll name her myself if I cannot find out what her name is,” concluded Miss Eliza. She set about to find the real name. The monogram E. L. on the pins was the only clue. The child might remember something. Taking her up in her lap, Eliza began a system of catechising.

“What shall Adee call you?”

“Baby.” She smiled back at her interlocutor until the dimples came and went.

“A prettier name than Baby. Shall I call you Elizabeth – Beth – Bessie?” She pronounced each name slowly, watching if it might awaken any show of memory. But it did not. The little girl smiled the more, even while she shook her head in negation.

“No, no – Izbeth not pitty name. Baby – ‘Itta one’ pitty name.”

Eliza would not let herself become discouraged. “Little One” and “Baby” were pet names given by some adoring fathers and mothers. Perhaps the child had seldom heard her correct name. Guided by the letters on the pins, Eliza repeated every name beginning with E; but it was without results.

“You must be called something,” she at last cried in desperation. “It must begin with E too. Elizabeth will do as well an anything else. It’s dignified enough for her when she’s grown up, and Beth or Bess will be well enough for a child. I’ve just got to call her something.”

So Elizabeth she became. Beth was what Eliza called her. Adee was the only title that the child could be induced to give to her foster-mother.

“Some one will claim her before the week passes,” Eliza had told herself again and again. She was hopeful that it would be so. A child is a great responsibility, and the woman had no desire to take it upon herself. July passed and no one came. August had come with all the glory of color and life rampant in yard and field.

Never before had flowers bloomed so luxuriantly even for Miss Eliza. The nasturtiums were blazing with burnt orange and carmine. Petunias flaunted their heavily laden stocks. The scarlet sages glowed from every shaded nook. There was braggadocio in every clump and cluster as though every flower being in flower-land was proclaiming, “See what we can do when we try.” High carnival of bloom! Gay revelry of color! Flaunt and brag! Flaunt and brag through all those wonderful days of August.

Eliza went from flower to flower and Beth followed. There was no need to tell the child not to step upon them or to pluck them ruthlessly. She picked her steps. Her fingers touched each petal caressingly. She loved them as much as the woman herself did.

Eliza was busy weeding. Bending over, she was patiently removing with the aid of a kitchen fork the sprouts of chick-weeds which would creep in among her treasures.

Beth, who had been following her closely, suddenly proved a laggard. Missing her at last, Eliza retraced her steps to the east side of the house where she had last seen the child. There she was down on her knees at the edge of the pansy bed and her head bent close over them.

“Whatever are you doing, Beth? Not hurting Adee’s flowers?”

“No, indeedy. I was ust a tissin ’em. A has so pitty itta faces. A ast me to tiss em.” There she was, putting her lips to each purple-yellow face, and talking with them as though they were real live babies. Eliza had nothing to say. She would have done that same thing herself when she was a child if she had dared. She knew exactly how Beth felt.

Sam Houston had come around the corner and had been a witness to the pretty scene. He had come over to borrow a hatchet and some nails. A board had come off his chicken-yard and the hens had destroyed what they could of his garden.

“Laws, Eliza!” he exclaimed. “You’ll not be able to get much from that child. She’ll not be practical. Common sense and not sentiment is what is needed in this world. She’ll be for settin’ out flowers an’ lettin’ cabbage go. I declare to goodness.” He was yet watching Beth kissing the pansies. “She’ll be as big a fool as you are about posies an’ sich like.”

“Do you really think so?” cried Eliza joyously, her face brightening up as though she had been paid a great compliment. Sam sniffed, “I’ve come over to get the lend of your hatchet and some nails. Those dern chickens got out somehow. The wimmen-folks must have left the door open.”

During July, Eliza had prefaced the duties of each morning with the reflection, “Her own kin will come for her before the week is out.”

During August, she changed her views. “Tain’t likely they’ll come this week. The weather is so uncertain. There might be a downpour any hour.”

But it was not until September set fairly in that the hope was fixed. She grew fearful that they would come. Her anxious eyes followed every strange vehicle which came down the road. She gave a sigh of relief when it passed her door.

“We’ll have a nice winter together – Beth and me. ‘Hain’t likely that they’ll come at winter time.”

So she satisfied her longings and kept the child with her.

CHAPTER IV

The months passed. Before Eliza was aware of it, the winter had passed. They had been strange months, filled with new experiences to the woman. When twilight fell, Beth had always crawled up into her lap and, snuggling close, demanded a story.

Eliza had never been fed on stories. She knew absolutely nothing about them. She had never tried to make up any, for the demand for them had never come.

“Tory, Adee. Tory, Adee.” There was no resisting that little appeal. There could be no denial for the tender caressing hands, and the sweet rose-bud mouth.

“What shall I tell about?” asked Eliza pausing for a time.

“Anyfing. F’owers what talk and tell tories; efeffants, and Santa Claus and fings like that.”

Eliza gasped for breath. Flowers were the only things she knew about. She did her best with the material on hand. She told a story of a poppy which was proud and haughty because its gown was gay and because it stood high above the other flowers. In its pride it ignored the humble, modest little violet which could barely raise its head above the sod. But when the second morning had come, the petals of the poppy lay scattered. Its glory was gone; but the violet yet smiled up from its lowly place and gave color to all about it.

“It’s booful, Adee. Tell me – a more one.”

Eliza put her off. One story at bed time was quite enough. A strange sensation of thrills had gone through her body while the story had been growing. She had never believed herself capable of anything half so fine. She had created something. The sensation of power was tingling through every nerve and muscle. She did not know it; neither did the child whose eyelids were closing in slumber; but with this experience she had crawled from the shell of dead customs, hide-bound, worn-out ideas and laws. There had been a real self hidden away for many years. It had never found a way for self-expression until now.

The black silk gown had undergone renovation since the day of the accident. A new sleeve had replaced the torn one, and the torn breadth in the skirt had been hidden by a broad fold. It was quite as good as ever.

The first time Eliza put it on, Beth took exception to it. The child stood in the middle of the room at a distance from her foster-parent, and could not be induced to come near her.

“Ug-e, ug-e dwess. Baby don’t like ug-e dwess.”

“Don’t you like Adee’s Sunday dress?” asked Eliza. The child shook her head to and fro, and persisted in calling it “ug-e dwess”.

“Then I shall wear another,” said Eliza. She made her way upstairs and Beth toddled after her. Going to the closet, the child began to tug and pull at a cheap little gown of dimity. Eliza had paid a shilling a yard for it the season before and had made it for “comfort”. But she could not keep the artist soul from showing in it any more than she could keep it from showing in the living room and gardens. The neck was just a little low and the sleeves reached just to the elbow. The ground was white with sprigs of pale pink roses scattered over it.

“Pitty dwess – pitty dwess,” Beth kept repeating. To please her, Eliza took it down and put it on. She looked at herself in the mirror and was better pleased with what she saw than she had been with the reflection of the black-robed figure. While she was dressing, Beth danced about her, exclaiming with delight at her pretty lady and the pretty dress.

So two things became fixed habits in the new household, – a story before bedtime and the pretty dresses in place of black.

So the year passed. The Jersey cow, the chickens, the vegetables from the summer provided for their needs. They needed little money. Wood was supplied from the trees on Eliza’s land.

Beth needed clothes; but her dresses were yet so small that little material was needed, and the shoes were so tiny that they cost but little.

Eliza made the little dresses. She went to the Bend for patterns and material. She even bought a book of styles to see how a child should be dressed. When she sat in the big living room with needle and thread, Beth sat beside her sewing diligently at doll clothes, or cutting fantastic shapes out of paper.

Beth quite fell in love with the pictures in the fashion plates and selected the finest ones of all as Adee.

“Is is Adee and 'is is Adee,” she would repeat again and again, laying her finger on the representations of splendid womanhood shown on the pages.

Eliza began to look beyond the year. She felt now that no one would ever claim Beth. She would have the child always. She was glad of that. She would need money to educate her. She would need more each year as the child grew older. So she watched the pennies closely. She wore shabby gloves all year in order to lay the money by.

“We'll both need new clothes by summer time,” she told herself. “There'll not be much. We'll get along on little.”

Indeed they needed little. The people about them had enough to keep them warm – and no more. So Eliza and the little girl needed, for the time, only necessities. The flowers which filled the bay windows; the great fire-place with its burning, snapping logs; Old Jerry, the cat, who made up the domestic hearth; Shep, the dog, who played guard to them, and the stories at twilight were sufficient to develop the cultural, sentimental side of life.

During the winter, few callers came. The roads were not good. Sometimes for days the drifts would fill them. It was impossible to go out at night, for no way was lighted. There were services of some kind each Sunday morning; Sunday-school and prayer meeting combined. Twice a month the supply minister came from one of the adjoining towns and held regular services, yet in spite of being alone, these two were never lonely.

The following summer, Eliza found that she would find an unexpected expense in her household account. The sugar box was emptied more quickly than ever before. Sometimes, she would fill a sugar bowl after the midday meal and would find it empty before supper time.

Yet Beth did not care for sugar. She would not touch it in her victuals, if it were there in sufficient amount to be noticeable.

One afternoon, Eliza found Beth standing on a chair before the shelf which bore the household supplies. Her little fists were crammed with sugar.

“What are you doing with it, Beth?” asked Eliza.

“I'se feed'n em. Ey wikes it. Tome and see.”

She made her way out the back door, crossed the yard and garden to where, at the border of the woodland, was a slight elevation.

Eliza followed. The slopes of the hill were alive with ants hurrying to and fro, each carrying a burden. Round about the entrance to the ant hills, Beth had made a circle of sugar.

“Ey wike it so. Ey is so very hungry.” Eliza did not scold her. She herself had been repressed along such lines when she was a child. Although she had long since forgotten the experience, the sympathy and understanding still remained with her.

Later she explained to Beth about not helping herself from the household store. She compromised, however, by promising to fill, and place where Beth could reach it, a small tin cup of sugar with which to feed the ants for the day.

Two years passed in such fashion. There came a time when Beth was undoubtedly of school age. The township school was a mile or more from the old Wells place.

Eliza thought little of that. A mile meant little to one accustomed to walking. She remembered something of the conditions of the school in her own childhood. She herself had been of such a nature

that she had not been contaminated. Her presence had repudiated all that was not pure and fine. From the standpoint of a woman, she saw the matters in a different light. She visited the school several times. Forty children were packed in one small room. There were classes from primary to grammar grades. The poor little tots in the chart class sat on hard seats until their backs ached. At recess and noon – almost all carried their dinners – they were turned out to play without restraint, the rough and boisterous with the gentle and timid, the vicious and unruly of older age with the tractable little folks whose minds were as a sheet of clean paper upon which no impression had been made.

Miss Eliza decided then that that particular school was not what she wished for the little girl she was to train for womanhood. For some months, she had learned all she could of new methods of teaching. For the first time in her life, she knew that the A, B, C's were out of date and that children were taught after a different fashion.

The school at the Bend had grown during the last five years. A supervisor with new ideas, and trained progressive teachers were making the grades equal to the best in the country. Eliza had heard of the work. Because she was interested, she had questioned and investigated.

The Bend was too far away for a child of Beth's age to walk alone, but Eliza was not one to give up easily.

"If the main road's closed against me, I'll find a foot-path or – I'll break a way through the underbrush," she was accustomed to say. She did that very thing now.

She visited the primary grades at the Bend. She sat an entire afternoon drinking in everything she could about teaching children. When the pupils were dismissed, she talked long with Miss Davis.

This teacher, who thought only of the help she might be to the child, copied the work she had laid out for the month, gave a first reader and slate to Miss Eliza, and explained how "Willie has a slate" should be taught for the first lesson.

Eliza started in her work. At the close of each month she visited Miss Davis and copied the teacher's plan for the next four weeks. So the second year of Beth's life with Miss Eliza passed. The child learned the numbers to twelve. She knew the stories which the first grade children should know, and she read the reader through from cover to cover. Added to this was a vocabulary of fifty words which she could write.

Miss Eliza was happy. The child had ability to learn. Eliza had a great admiration for book knowledge. She had lacked so much in that line herself. It was the unattainable to her; consequently she put great value upon it.

Miss Davis and her corps of teachers taught Eliza more than methods in teaching first grade work. They were fully as old as Eliza herself; but they wore gowns which were quite up-to-date. They arranged their hair to bring out the very best of their features.

They talked about skating and literary clubs, and calls, and afternoon teas. One had even gone out with her pupils and coasted down hill, and not one was shocked or even thrilled when she related it.

Eliza listened. She was not a dullard. To use the vernacular of Shintown, "Eliza Wells was no one's fool, in spite of her queer old ways." Her queer old way was loving flowers, giving artistic touch to the dullest places.

She showed her best qualities now in listening and culling the best from these teachers whose opportunities were broader and whose lives were fuller than hers had been.

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.