



















Eliza pinched Beck. “There’s nothing wrong with being a girl. I’ve worked very hard to learn to be a proper girl.”

Beck rolled her eyes. “What, pray tell, is a proper girl?”

“Elizabeth Pearson!” Eliza stopped abruptly and turned to face her friend, causing Beck to bump into her. “With all the hours we’ve spent reading *The Habits of Good Society* and all the years we’ve spent practicing the art of proper address, modesty, and womanly arts—how can you even jest?”

Beck just laughed, grabbed Eliza’s arm, and pulled her along.



Later that evening when Eliza put the hat trimmings back into the linen press, she lifted out the tiny beribboned cap Mum had made for her christening. She fingered its softness. She had long heard the story of her birth—how her parents and grandparents were delighted at long last to welcome a baby girl. Mum and Papa often said that, though they came from good church-going families, it was not until Eliza was a toddler that they knelt at the altar to commit themselves and their family to God. Since that day, they did not hold with a Sunday-only faith. Eliza’s mother always liked to say that she had a fiery religion. “I was born in the fire and cannot live in the smoke.”

Papa and Mum doted on Eliza. When her father became a part-time preacher, the congregation loved her as well—definitely a nice way to grow up. While the Shirleys were not

wealthy, food was always plentiful and their home comfortable. In truth, Eliza could not recall ever doing without something she wanted.

She had few clear memories of those early years, but she did remember gathering up the silk skirts on her Sunday dress and sitting gingerly on the edge of the rough pew. She always tried to be careful not to crease the intricate drape of her skirt or the tiny pleats around the hem. As Papa began his sermon, she hooked and unhooked the ankle button boots that matched her dress. She learned to do it with nimble, patient fingers instead of the usual buttonhook. Her father laughed when he saw unbuttoned shoes after church—always pretending to believe she couldn't have done it herself. He'd turn to Mum and say, "Annie, she's too little. Somebody must have crawled under the pew and unbuttoned Lizzie's shoes."

Eliza still remembered standing in the narthex with her hands on her hips, nearly stomping her foot out of an unbuttoned boot as she replied, "I do it. Lizzie big."

Eliza loved pretty things. Some of her first memories were color and smell memories—like the scent of the moss rose climbing over the stone wall in the garden and the colors of the silk floss in her mother's needlework basket. The feel of things mattered to her as well—smooth fabrics against her skin; starched petticoats; crisp ringlets bump-bumping against her ear. Her mother understood. Mum used to roll her eyes in pretend frustration and say, "It's a good thing Eliza is an only child since those ringlets take two curling irons and the hottest of fires."

Despite her delight in finery, Eliza's clearest memory centered on her father's sermons. Even before she could read, she learned that the way to keep attentive during the long hour was to try to memorize the whole thing. She worked hard to remember the words, repeating them over and over when her father paused.

Parishioners often remarked to her father about Eliza's "proper comportment" during service. It was sheer concentration, not manners. As she got older, she tried to figure out the bones of his sermon; for as soon as she uncovered the structure, it was much easier to put the parts together. Her parents were amazed at her ability to memorize whole sermons and then mimic her father's delivery. To this day, she could still repeat many of his sermons.

She'd never forget the time, at the age of twelve, when she walked down the aisle of her father's church in response to a particularly inspiring sermon. As she fell to her knees, she repeated—word for word—some of the stirring phrases from Papa's sermon. Her mother cried and, afterward, Beck kept hugging Eliza, practically crushing her skirts. She loved it.

"Oh, Lizzie. I've been praying for you for the longest time," Beck said. "Now you're saved." Beck's strong faith and bold way of stating things always made Eliza feel a little uncomfortable.

"It was an effective message, was it not?"

Beck looked confused. "I'm talking about your profession of faith, not your father's sermon."

“Yes, well . . . I’m going to work hard to live up to my father’s challenge.”

Beck didn’t answer.

Nearly a year afterward, while walking home from school, Beck asked her friend about that day. Eliza just laughed in a playful way. “I tried getting forgiveness for sin and following Jesus, but it just didn’t work out quite right.” She shrugged her shoulders. “I’ll just keep working out my salvation as I go—one little piece at a time.”

“Work it out?”

“A little bit at a time.” Eliza laughed and poked a teasing finger at her friend. “Truth be told, coming before God and confessing sinfulness takes more boldness than a gently bred girl can muster.”

Beck said little as they continued their walk to school.



Those memories seemed long past. Now that Eliza was fifteen, she had finished with her studies. Her job was to learn the womanly arts—things like sewing, cooking, mending, cleaning, making soap and candles, and mastering fancy needlework. She also helped her mother call on the church members and take baskets to the sick and aged. For the most part she loved it and worked hard to please her mother.

The most fun, however, came when Beck called for a visit. “Lizzie, come out to the garden. Let’s talk.”

Eliza took a basket of socks that needed darning. It was cool in early March, but buds could be seen swelling on many of the branches. She looked at the tangle of vines along the garden wall. In early summer they'd be covered with roses, but on this chilly day she found it hard to believe those dry vines held the promise of such fragrant treasure. For now, the smell of wood chimney fires hung over the garden.

"Are you out paying calls, Beck?"

"Indeed not. That sounds so grown-up." Beck poked her. "But I guess we're far too old to say I came to play."

"Play sounds nice. Sometimes I think I'll be cooking and cleaning the rest of my life."

"I thought you loved those things!"

Eliza pulled a holey sock over the smooth wooden darning egg. "I do. Truly." She jabbed the needle into the sock.

"Well, it's a fact that we'll do our share of cooking and cleaning during our lifetimes, but sometimes I pray, asking God for more—for a bigger assignment."

"Beck!" Sometimes her friend said things that shocked Eliza.

Beck leaned in closer as she changed the subject, "Remember when I told you I sensed a change in the air?"

"I remember the day, though I don't remember what made you say that."

"Just a feeling," Beck said. "Anyway, I just came back from taking dinner to my father at the mill."

"You went alone?"

“Lizzie, I am not afraid.” Beck spoke those words as if speaking to a not-so-bright child. “I’m a big girl—strong—with a loud voice and fast feet. I’m not about to let a few ruffians keep me from doing what I need to do.”

Eliza laughed. “I guess they wouldn’t want to tangle with you after all.”

“As I walked through the streets, I sensed something on the wind—more than ever.” Beck stopped as if thinking.

“What?” Eliza dropped her sock into the basket and set it on the bench. “Don’t stop now—you’ve got my curiosity stirred.”

“I wish I knew. I saw genteel women dressed in black talking to the roughest of characters twice today. I wanted to find out what they were about, but I wasn’t fast enough.”

“Strange indeed.”

“I know.” Beck sounded perplexed. “If this weren’t jolly old England, I’d almost suspect a revolution about to happen.”

“Goodness, Beck. You’re letting your imagination run wild.”

“No, Lizzie. I know it’s not a revolution but it is *something*.” She shook her head as if trying to shake out the cobwebs. “Without a doubt, it is *something*.”