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Nothing but a Girl

Nothin' but a girl," the boy mocked in a singsong chant as he ran into the alley. Black coal dust covered his face, save for pink circles around his eyes and mouth. His empty lunch tin banged the brick building as he cut the corner. "Yer nothin' but a girl!"

Eliza turned away from him, clearly ignoring him. He'd been taunting her for most of her fifteen years.

"Eliza Shirley," Beck said as they continued on, "are you going to let him mock you that way every time we come out here to run an errand?" Eliza's friend Beck was nothing if not loyal.

"What good would it do to argue?" Eliza wished she could keep from letting the likes of Jack Sipes rattle her. With a shake of her head, she said, "I keep trying to ignore him—he's so annoying! He'll say anything to get me stirred. If I let him see me riled, he'll only grow bolder."

“Why does he tease you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s just a habit.”

Before Jack went to work in the coal pits at the Coventry Colliery, he had attended free school with Eliza. Each time the schoolmistress called Eliza to the front of the schoolroom for recitation, she could see Jack mouthing those same words from the back of the room—“nothing but a girl.”

“He left school, but he still heckles me whenever he sees me on the street,” Eliza said.

“I still don’t see why,” Beck said. “He never bothers me.”

“I don’t know. I never tried to be anything more than a proper girl.” Eliza paused. “I confess it bothers me, though I don’t know why.” Eliza noticed he often seemed to be around when she had to venture into the mill district. “I’d like to know when Jack Sipes works!”

“All those boys work—and they work hard—but when they are off work, they do seem to look for trouble,” Beck said.

Not that it would be hard to find—the street teemed with trouble. Hungry-looking children darted in and out of alleyways. Eliza watched one boy, with an even smaller girl in tow, lurking near the entrance of a building. He couldn’t have been more than six or seven years old and wore clothes so tattered the rag picker would’ve discarded them. Eliza watched him cup his hand to beg a farthing or two off a merchant dressed in ruffles and tight breeches. She flinched as the man cuffed the boy out of the way and was dismayed when, without even looking to see where the child landed, the man pulled out a

handkerchief to wipe the back of his hand where it came into contact with the boy.

“We shouldn’t dawdle in this part of town.” Eliza shuddered. She linked her arm through Beck’s and pulled her along, as if to hurry her out of the rough streets.

Eliza couldn’t avoid these streets. There was no way to get to the mill without traveling through the squalor of the mill district when she carried a message to her father at work.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught movement before she heard noise. Three grimy boys ran past the girls, chasing an old dog. They’d tied pieces of tin to the dog’s tail. The jangle of the tin against the cobbles, the whimpers of the frightened dog, and the taunts of the boys added to the racket of the street.

“Stop!” Eliza yelled at the trio as she picked up her skirts and crinolines and ran after the boys. She nearly slipped in a slimy puddle that must have come from a slops bucket emptied out the window. *Yuck!* The thought of the foul mess soaking her hem nearly made her retch, but she forced herself to put it out of her mind and keep going. She managed to catch the shirttail of the littlest boy.

“What are you doing?” she demanded.

“What’s it to ya?”

“You were being cruel to that dog.”

“He don’t belong to no one.” The boy wriggled out of her grasp. “Sides, you can’t tell me what to do.” He jerked out of her grip and darted off.

Beck caught up with Eliza just as she tried to decide whether to give chase again.

“It’s a lost cause, Lizzie,” Beck said.

“I know, but I hate to see an old dog terrified.” She looked down at the stain wicking higher on her hem. She needed to get home and change clothes. What was wrong with her? She had jumped into the fray to help an old dog while a few minutes before she ignored a man striking a hungry child.

“Those boys’ll tire of it soon, and you needn’t worry,” Beck said, as they continued toward home. “A tinker will gratefully untie the dog to salvage those pieces of tin.” She lifted her skirts, sidestepping an oily pile of fur. The decaying rodent-like smell implied a dead rat.

“Don’t even tell me what that was.” Eliza looked the other way, willing her stomach to unclench.

“Doesn’t it seem like the mill workers and colliers get worse and worse?” Beck observed. “Their children as well. More profane and somehow bolder, and yet . . .”

“And yet?” Eliza waited for Beck to finish.

“And yet I sense a change coming—almost like a breeze blowing through.”

“A change? What kind of change?” Eliza looked around at the confusion and couldn’t see anything different.

“I wish I knew. I just feel as if we are on a cusp—standing at a turning point.”

“Oh, Beck, you and your notions.” Eliza laughed, but she knew her friend. Beck paid attention to things and, more often than not, her notions were spot on.

Eliza had grown up in Coventry, but there were many parts of the city she dared not enter alone. The swearing, drinking, gambling—and probably much worse—took place right on the streets and in the alleys. Wagons still rolled down the middle of the lanes, but the horses flinched and sidestepped with the confusion of zigzagging street urchins and hungry dogs. Eliza always felt skittish herself when in this part of town.

As they drew closer to home, the streets grew noticeably cleaner, and the evening sounds of carriages and costermongers replaced barking dogs and drunken brawls.

“Beck, do you ever wonder what life would have been like if we had to go to work in the mill instead of finishing our studies?”

“We are fortunate indeed. My da tells me about mothers trying to get their kids on at the mill when they are seven or eight years old. They lie about their ages.” Beck’s father worked at the mill where Eliza’s father was foreman.

Eliza shook her head and made a clicking noise with her tongue. “They’re not supposed to start them until they are at least nine.” She thought of those boys torturing the old dog and wondered if the streets were any better for them than the mill.

“Da says they hate to turn away the little children coming in for work. If they don’t work, they may not get anything to eat.”

“But they need to get a year or two of school in first.”

“Indeed, they ought to be in school, but if they’re not

taken on at the mill, they'll likely end up in the coal pits." Beck sighed. "I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. Your father must see the same thing."

"Papa doesn't talk about it." And Eliza tried not to dwell on it. "He doesn't like to burden Mother and me."

Beck didn't say anything, and they walked silently for a while.

Eliza reached out to run her hand along the iron railing on a fence. She loved feeling the bump, bump, bump against her gloved fingers. "One time Papa gave me an especially pretty jacquard ribbon. When I commented on the pattern, he shrugged it off as if the ribbon vexed him. Said that the company claims to make silk ribbons of 'unsurpassed beauty,' but he couldn't see past the ugliness that went into the making."

"I know," Beck said, nodding. "The youngest children start as scavengers." Beck looked at Eliza in that piercing way. "Lizzie, the machinery is still running while they crawl around under it. If a child's hair should get caught . . ."

Though they had been best friends for years, Beck—whose real name was Elizabeth Pearson—still surprised Eliza. At fourteen, Beck was a full year younger than Eliza, but she was much more knowing. She was strong and blunt and took pride in meeting things head-on.

How different they were. Eliza didn't mind not knowing. In fact, she preferred not knowing about ugly things. Eliza looked at Beck's strong hands and heard the timbre in her voice. She looked down at her own undersized, fluttery hands

gloved in pale kid leather. Somehow Jack's words crept back, *nothing but a girl*.

Being an only child, she knew her parents cosseted her. It never bothered Eliza one bit. She longed to live amid beauty and calm. She wasn't alone. All of gentle English society in 1878, under the example of proper Queen Victoria, worked hard at embracing beauty and calm.

"Do we have to keep talking about this?" Eliza hated the whine she heard in her voice. She ran her hands down her skirt, smoothing the fabric.

"No." Beck let her shoulders droop. "Besides, I can always tell when you become upset. You smooth your skirts until they're practically plastered against your legs."

Eliza plumped her skirts out, arranged her reticule on her wrist, and clasped her hands together. "I *do* care. It's just that I have a bold imagination coupled with a delicate stomach. I want to care without hearing details."

"Don't worry, Lizzie. I'm just as bad. I may talk about it, but I do precious little to change things," Beck said. "After all, 'twasn't I who went chasing like a hoyden after a ragtag bunch of guttersnipes."

Eliza blushed. "Speaking of changing things, I have a new chipstraw bonnet, and Papa brought home a long tartan grosgrain ribbon. Want to have tea and help me trim my new bonnet?"

Beck laughed. "And tell me again why it bothers you to have Jack accuse you of being a girl?"

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*.”

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