

## Chapter 2 Elizabeth Ann Holds the Reins

You can imagine perhaps the dreadful terror of Elizabeth Ann as the train carried her along toward Vermont and the horrible Putney Farm! It had happened so quickly—her satchel packed, the telegram sent, the train caught—that she had not had time to get her wits together, assert herself, and say that she *could not* go there! Besides, she had a sinking notion that perhaps they wouldn't have paid any attention to her if she had. The world had nearly come to an end now that Aunt Frances wasn't there to take care of her. Even in the most familiar air, she could only half breathe without Aunt Frances. And now she was not even being taken to the Putney Farm. Like a parcel she was being sent!

She shrank together in her seat—more and more frightened as the end of her journey came nearer—and looked out dismally at the winter landscape, thinking it hideous with its bare brown fields, its bare brown trees, and the quick-running little streams hurrying along, swollen with the January thaw which had taken all the snow from the hills. She had heard her aunts say about her so many times that she couldn't possibly stand the cold that now she shivered at the very thought of cold weather. And certainly nothing could look colder than that bleak country into which the train was slowly making its way.

The engine puffed and puffed with great, laboring breaths that shook Elizabeth Ann's diaphragm up and down, but the train moved more and more slowly. Elizabeth Ann could feel under her feet how the floor of the car was tipped up as it crept along the steep incline.

"Pretty stiff grade here?" asked a passenger of the conductor.

"Sure is!" he assented. "But Hillsboro is the next station, and that's at the top of the hill. We go down after

that to Rutland." He turned to Elizabeth Ann. "Say, little girl, didn't your uncle say you were to get off at Hillsboro? You'd better be getting your things together."

Poor Elizabeth Ann's knees knocked against each other with fear of the strange faces she was to encounter, and when the conductor came to help her get off, he had to carry the little, trembling child as well as her satchel! But there was only one strange face there—not another soul in sight at the little wooden station. A grim-faced older man in a fur cap and heavy coat stood by a lumber wagon.

"This is her, Mr. Putney," said the conductor, touching his cap.\* He dropped the child and the satchel rather unceremoniously at Mr. Putney's feet, and then he turned back to the train, which went shrieking off to the nearby crossing and set the echoes ringing from one mountain to another.

So now here was Elizabeth Ann alone with her much-feared great-uncle Henry. He gave her a hand up, nodded to her, and drew out from the bottom of the wagon a warm large cape, which he slipped over her shoulders.

"The womenfolk were afraid you'd get cold driving," he explained.

He then lifted her high to the seat, tossed her satchel into the wagon, climbed up himself, and clucked to his horses. Elizabeth Ann had always before thought it an essential part of railway journeys to be much kissed at the end and asked a great many times how you had "stood the trip." As she thought it over, she decided she was much relieved that Uncle Henry hadn't felt the need to give her a kiss, but she couldn't understand his not even asking how she had fared under the strain of such an adventure. So she sat very still on the high lumber seat, feeling very forlorn and neglected.

Elizabeth Ann's feet dangled high above the floor of the wagon. She felt herself to be in the most dangerous place

she had ever dreamed of in her worst of dreams. And why wasn't Aunt Frances there to take care of her? It was *just like* one of her bad dreams. Actually, it was horrible! She could fall . . . or she could roll under the wheels of the wagon . . . . She looked up at Uncle Henry with the wild, anxious eyes of nervous terror which always brought Aunt Frances to her in a rush to "hear all about it," to sympathize, to reassure.

Uncle Henry looked down at her soberly, his hard, weather-beaten face quite unmoved. "Here, you drive, will you for a piece?" he said briefly, putting the reins into her hands. He hooked his spectacles over his ears and drew out a stubby pencil and a bit of paper. "I've got some figuring to do. You pull on the left-hand rein to make 'em go to the left and pull the other way for the other way though it's not likely we'll meet any teams for a while yet."

Elizabeth Ann had been so near one of her wild screams of terror that now, in spite of her instant, absorbed interest in the reins, she gave a queer little yelp. She was all ready with an explanation, her conversations with Aunt Frances having made her very fluent in elucidations of her own emotions. She would tell Uncle Henry about how scared she had been and how she had just been about to scream and couldn't keep back that one little . . .

But Uncle Henry seemed not to have heard her little howl or, if he had, didn't think it worth conversation, for he was bent over his paper, scratching away and paying no mind at all to Elizabeth Ann. Oh! The horses were *certainly* going to one side! She hastily decided which was her right hand (she had never been forced to know it so quickly before) and pulled furiously on that rein. The horses turned their hanging heads a little, and—extraordinarily—there they were in the middle of the road again.

Elizabeth Ann drew a long breath of relief and pride and

looked to Uncle Henry for praise. But he was still busily setting down figures as though he were finishing his arithmetic lesson for the next day and had not noticed.

Oops! There they were going to the left again! This time in her flurry, she made a mistake about which hand was which and pulled wildly on the left line. The horses walked obediently off the road into a shallow ditch, and the wagon tilted precariously.

"Help!" yelled Elizabeth Ann. Oh, why didn't Uncle Henry help? But Uncle Henry didn't even look up. He persisted in intently figuring on the back of his envelope.

Elizabeth Ann, the perspiration starting out on her forehead, pulled on the other line. The horses turned back up the little slope, the wheel grated sickeningly against the wagon box, and she was absolutely *sure* they would tip over. But there! Somehow there they were in the road again, safe and sound, with Uncle Henry adding up a column of figures. If he only knew, thought the little girl, if he only *knew* the danger he had been in and how he had been saved! But now she must think of some way to remember for sure which her right hand was so as to avoid that dreadful mistake again.

And then suddenly something inside Elizabeth Ann's head stirred and moved. It came to her like a thunderclap that she needn't know which was right or left at all. If she just pulled the way she wanted them to go—the horses would never know whether it was the right or the left rein!

It is possible that what stirred inside her head at that moment was her brain waking up. She was nine years old, and she was in the third A grade at school, but that was the first time she could remember ever having had *a whole thought of her very own*. At home Aunt Frances had always known exactly what she was doing before she did it and had helped her over the hard places before she even knew they were there; and of course, the teachers at school had been

carefully trained to think ahead of the scholars. Somebody had always been explaining things to Elizabeth Ann so industriously that she had never found out a single thing for herself before. This was a very small discovery, to be sure, but it was an original one. Elizabeth Ann was as excited about it as a mother bird over the first egg that hatches.

She forgot how afraid she was of Uncle Henry and poured out to him her discovery. "It's not right or left that matters!" she crowed triumphantly. "It's which way you want to go!"

Uncle Henry looked at her attentively as she talked, eyeing her sidewise over the top of one spectacle-glass. "Well now, that's so," he admitted. Then he returned to his arithmetic.

It was a short remark, shorter than any Elizabeth Ann had ever heard before. Aunt Frances and her teachers always explained matters at some length. But it had a weighty, satisfying ring to it. The little girl felt the importance of having her statement recognized. She turned back to her driving.

The slow, heavy plow horses had stopped during her talk with Uncle Henry. They stood as still now as though their feet had grown to the road. Elizabeth Ann looked up at Uncle Henry for instructions. But he was deep in his figures. She had been taught never to interrupt people, so she sat still and waited for him to tell her what to do.

But although they were driving in the midst of a winter thaw, it was a pretty cold day with an icy wind blowing down the back of her neck. The early winter twilight was beginning to fall, and Elizabeth Ann hadn't eaten in hours and felt rather empty. She grew very tired of waiting, and she suddenly remembered how the grocer's boy at home had started his horse. So summoning all her courage and taking one apprehensive glance at Uncle Henry's arithmetical

silence, she slapped the reins up and down on the horses' backs and made the best imitation she could of the grocer boy's cluck. The horses lifted their heads, they leaned forward, they put one foot before the other . . . *and they were off!* The color rose hot on Elizabeth Ann's happy face. If she had started a big red automobile, she would not have been prouder. For it was the first thing she had ever done all herself . . . every bit . . . every smitch! She had thought of it, and she had done it, and it had worked!

Now for what seemed to her a long, long time, she drove; and she drove so hard that she could think of nothing else. She guided the horses around stones; she cheered them through freezing mud puddles of melted snow; she kept them in the anxiously exact middle of the road. She was quite astonished when Uncle Henry finally put his pencil and paper away, took the reins from her hands, and drove into a yard on one side of which was a little white house and on the other side a big red barn. He did not say a word, but Elizabeth Ann guessed at once that this was Putney Farm.

Two women in gingham dresses and white aprons came out of the house. One was an older lady, and the other might be called young, just like Aunt Harriet and Aunt Frances. But they looked very different from those aunts. The dark-haired one was very tall and strong-looking, and the white-haired one was rosy and solidly built. They both looked up at the little girl on the high seat and smiled.

"Well, Father, you got her, I see," said the brown-haired one. She stepped up to the wagon and held up her arms to the child. "Come on in, Betsy, and get some supper," she said—just as though Elizabeth Ann had lived there all her life and often drove into town and back.\*\* And that was the arrival of Elizabeth Ann at Putney Farm.

Then the brown-haired woman took a long, strong step or two and swung her up on the porch. "You take her in,

Mother," she said. "I'll help Father unhitch."

The rosy, white-haired woman took Elizabeth Ann's small, cold hand in her own soft, warm large one and led her along to the open kitchen door. "I'm your aunt Abigail," she said. "Your mother's aunt, you know. And that's your cousin Ann that lifted you down, and it was your uncle Henry that brought you out from town." She shut the door and went on, "I don't know if your aunt Harriet ever happened to tell you about us, and so . . ."

Elizabeth Ann interrupted her hastily, the recollection of all Aunt Harriet's remarks vividly before her. "Oh yes! Oh yes!" she said. "She always talked about you. She talked about you a lot; she . . ." The little girl stopped short and bit her lip.

If Aunt Abigail guessed from the expression on Elizabeth Ann's face what kind of talking Aunt Harriet had done, she showed it only by a deepening of the wrinkles all around her eyes. She said gravely, "Well, that's a good thing. You know all about us, then."

She turned to the stove and took out of the oven a pan of hot baked beans, very brown and crispy on top (Elizabeth Ann was not very fond of beans), and said over her shoulder, "Take your things off, Betsy, and hang 'em on that lowest hook back of the door. That's *your* hook."

The little girl fumbled dejectedly with the fastenings of her cape and the buttons of her coat. At home Aunt Frances or Grace had always taken off her wraps and put them away for her.

When, feeling very sorry for herself, she turned away from the hook, her aunt Abigail said, "Now you must be cold. Pull a chair right up here by the stove."

She was bustling around quickly as she put supper on the table. After living with Aunt Frances and Aunt Harriet and Grace, none of whom moved very fast or made any

clatter at all, the little girl could scarcely believe her eyes. She stared and stared.

Aunt Abigail seemed not to notice this. Indeed, she seemed for the moment to have forgotten all about the newcomer. Elizabeth Ann sat on the wooden chair, her feet hanging (she had been taught that it was not manners to put her feet on the rungs), looking about her with miserable, homesick eyes. What an unsightly, low-ceilinged room with only a couple of dreadful kerosene lamps for light. They didn't keep any girl evidently. And they were going to eat right in the kitchen like poor people! And nobody spoke to Elizabeth Ann or looked at her or asked her how she had "stood the trip," and here she was millions of miles away from Aunt Frances without anybody to take care of her properly. She began to feel that tight place in her throat which, by thinking about hard, she could always turn into tears, and presently her eyes began to water.

Aunt Abigail was not looking at her at all, but she now stopped short in one of her rushes to the table, set down the butter plate she was carrying, and said, "There!" as though she had forgotten something. She stooped—it was perfectly amazing how spry she was—and pulled out from under the stove a half-grown kitten, very sleepy, yawning and stretching and blinking its eyes.

"There, Betsy!" said Aunt Abigail, putting the little yellow-and-white ball into the child's lap. "There is one of Whitey's kittens that didn't get given away last summer, and she pesters me terribly. I've got so much to do. When I heard you were coming, I thought maybe you would take care of her for me. If you want to, enough to bother to feed her and all, you can have her for your own."

Elizabeth Ann bent her tear-streaked face over the warm, furry, friendly little animal. She could not speak. She had always wanted a kitten, but Aunt Frances and Aunt Harriet



and Grace had always been sure that cats brought diphtheria and tonsillitis and all sorts of dreadful diseases to delicate little girls. She was afraid to move for fear the little thing would jump down and run off; but as she bent cautiously toward it, the necktie of her middy blouse fell forward. The kitten, in the middle of a yawn, struck swiftly at it with a soft paw. Then, still too sleepy to play, it turned its head and began to lick Elizabeth Ann's hand with a rough little tongue. Perhaps you can imagine how thrilled the little girl was at this!

She held her hand perfectly still until the kitten stopped and began suddenly washing its own face, and then she put her hands under it and very awkwardly lifted it up, burying her face in the soft fur. The kitten yawned again, and from the pink-lined mouth came a fresh, milky breath.

"Oh!" said Elizabeth Ann softly. "Oh, you *darling thing!*"

The kitten looked at her with solemn, speculative eyes.

Elizabeth Ann looked up now at Aunt Abigail and said, "What is its name, please?"

But the busy woman was turning over a griddle full of pancakes and did not hear. On the train Elizabeth Ann had resolved not to call *these* relatives by the same name she had for dear Aunt Frances, but she now forgot that resolution and said again, "Oh, Aunt Abigail, what is its name?"

Aunt Abigail faced her blankly. "Name?" she asked. "Whose name? Oh, the kitten's? Believe me, child, I stopped racking my brain for kitten names sixty years ago. Name it yourself. It's yours."

Elizabeth Ann had already named it in her own mind, the name she had always thought she *would* call a kitten by if she ever had one. It was Eleanor, the prettiest name she knew.

Aunt Abigail pushed a pitcher toward her. "There's the

cat's saucer under the sink. Don't you want to give it some milk?"

Elizabeth Ann got down from her chair, poured some milk into the saucer, and called, "Here, Eleanor! Here, Eleanor!"

Aunt Abigail looked at her sharply out of the corner of her eye, and her lips twitched, but a moment later her face was immovably grave as she carried the last plate of pancakes to the table. Elizabeth Ann sat on her heels for a long time, watching the kitten lap the milk, and she was surprised when she stood up to see that Cousin Ann and Uncle Henry had come in, looking very red-cheeked from the cold air.

"Well, folks," said Aunt Abigail, "don't you think we've done some lively stepping around, Betsy and I, to get supper all on the table for you?"

Elizabeth Ann stared. What did Aunt Abigail mean? She hadn't done a thing about getting supper! But nobody made any comment, and they all took their seats and began to eat.

Elizabeth Ann was astonishingly hungry, and she thought she could never get enough of the creamed potatoes, cold ham, pancakes, and hot cocoa. She was very much relieved that her refusal of beans caused no comment. Aunt Frances had always tried very hard to make her eat beans because they have so much protein in them, and growing children do need protein. Elizabeth Ann had heard this said so many times she could have repeated it backward, but it had never yet served to increase her appreciation for the dish. However, nobody here seemed to know about her need for protein, so Elizabeth Ann kept her knowledge to herself.

They had also evidently never heard how delicate her digestion was, for she never saw anything like the number of

pancakes they let her eat. *All she wanted?* She had never heard of such a thing!

They still did not ask her how she had "stood the trip." They did not indeed ask her much of anything or pay very much attention to her at all beyond filling her plate as fast as she could empty it. In the middle of the meal, Eleanor came, jumped into her lap, and curled down, purring. After this Elizabeth Ann kept one hand on the little, soft ball and handled her fork with the other.

After supper—well, Elizabeth Ann never knew what did happen after supper until she felt somebody lifting her and carrying her upstairs. It was Cousin Ann, who carried her as lightly as though she were a baby and who said as she sat her down on the floor in the slant-ceilinged bedroom, "You went right to sleep with your head on the table. I guess you're pretty tired."

Aunt Abigail was already there and sitting on the edge of a great, wide bed with four posts and a curtain around the top. She was wearing a long nightgown and was undoing her hair and brushing it out. Her hair was very curly and fell like a thick mane all about her shining pink face, which was full of soft wrinkles; but then in a moment, she was braiding her hair up again and putting on a tight white nightcap, which she tied under her chin.

"We got the word about your coming so late," said Cousin Ann, "that we didn't have time to fix you up a bedroom that can be warmed. So you're going to sleep in here for a while. The bed's big enough for two, I guess. Oh, Mother, did you put Shep out?"

Aunt Abigail said, "No! There! I forgot to!"

So Cousin Ann went away, and that was the last of her for the night. They certainly believed in being saving of their words at Putney Farm.

Elizabeth Ann began to undress. She was only half

awake, and that made her feel only about half her age, which wasn't very great the whole of it; and she felt like just crooking her arm over her eyes and having a good cry. She was so homesick! She had never slept with anybody before, and she had heard ever so many times how bad it was for one's constitution.

An icy wind rattled the windows and puffed in around the loose wooden casings. On the windowsill lay a little bank of snow. Elizabeth Ann shivered and shook, undressed in a hurry, and slipped into her nightdress. She felt just as cold inside as out and never was more utterly miserable than in that strange little room with a strange aunt and no bed to call her own. She brooded over it for so long that she felt even too wretched to cry anymore, and that is saying a great deal for Elizabeth Ann!

Elizabeth Ann had crawled into bed first because Aunt Abigail said she was going to keep the candle lighted for a while and read.

"And anyhow," she said, "I'd better sleep on the outside to keep you from rolling out."

Both Elizabeth Ann and Aunt Abigail lay very still for a long time, and Aunt Abigail read out of a small worn book. Elizabeth Ann could see its title, *Essays of Emerson*. A book with that name had always lain on the center table in Aunt Harriet's house, but Aunt Harriet's copy was all new and shiny, and Elizabeth Ann had never seen anybody actually look inside it. It was not a picture book, and Aunt Abigail made no attempt at conversation; so the little girl lay on her back, looking up at the cracks in the plaster ceiling and watching the shadows sway and dance as the candle flickered in the gusts of cold air. But she herself began to feel a soft, pervasive warmth under the heavy quilts that Aunt Abigail had pulled up over them.

It was very, very quiet—quieter than any place Elizabeth

Ann had ever known except church—because a trolley line ran past Aunt Harriet's house, so even at night there were always more or less bangings and rattlings. Here there was not a single sound except the soft, whispery noise when Aunt Abigail turned over a page as she read steadily and silently forward in her book. Elizabeth Ann turned her head so that she could see the round rosy face, full of soft wrinkles, and the calm, steady eyes which were fixed on the page. And as she lay there in the warm bed, watching that quiet face, something very queer began to happen to Elizabeth Ann. She felt as though a tight knot inside her were slowly being untied. She felt—what was it she felt? There are no words for it. From deep within her something rose up softly. She drew one or two long, half-sobbing breaths.

Aunt Abigail laid down her book and looked over at the child. "Do you know," she said in a casual tone, "do you know, I think it's going to be really nice having a little girl in the house again."

Oh, then the tight knot in the lonely little girl's heart was loosened indeed! It all gave way at once, and Elizabeth Ann burst suddenly into hot tears. Yes, I know. I said I wouldn't tell you any more about her crying, but these tears were very different from any she had ever shed before. And they were the last, too, for a long, long time.

Aunt Abigail said, "Well, well!" and, moving over in bed, took the weeping little girl into her arms.

She did not say another word then, but she put her soft, withered cheek close against Elizabeth Ann's till the sobs began to grow less, and then she said, "I hear your kitty crying outside the door. Shall I let her in? I expect she'd like to sleep with you. And I guess there's room for three of us."

She got out of bed as she spoke and walked across the

room to the door. When she came back with the kitten in her arms, Elizabeth Ann hastily dried her eyes and reached for it. Aunt Abigail gave Eleanor to the little girl and got into bed again.

"There now, I guess we're ready for the night," she said. "You put the kitty on the other side of you so she won't be climbing over me."

She blew out the candle and moved over a little closer to Elizabeth Ann, and the soft, furry kitten curled up under the little girl's chin. Elizabeth Ann drew a long, long breath . . . and when she opened her eyes, the sun was shining in at the window.

\* In proper English one would say, "This is she."

\*\* Cousin Ann confers a nickname on Elizabeth Ann on her arrival at Putney Farm. Nicknames are often used as terms of endearment by relatives and friends, and so long as the parents concur, there is likely no harm done. Yet names and their meanings are very important, and they have often been chosen with much care and with a mind to convey a certain message or legacy, so consideration is warranted before devising or acquiring a nickname in any case. Proverbs 22:1