

OUR ELIZABETH
A HUMOUR NOVEL

BY
FLORENCE A. KILPATRICK

ILLUSTRATED BY ERNEST FORBES



[Frontispiece: Elizabeth Renshaw.]

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THORNTON BUTTERWORTH LIMITED
62 ST. MARTIN'S LANE, LONDON, W.C. 2

Published November 1920

TO CIS

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Elizabeth is not a type; she is an individuality. Signs and omens at her birth no doubt determined her sense of the superstitious; but I trace her evolution as a figure of fun to some sketches of mine in the pages of Punch. These, however, were only impressions of Elizabeth on a small scale, but I acknowledge the use of them here in the process of developing her to full life-size. Elizabeth, as I say, is a personality apart; there is only one Elizabeth. Here she is.

F. A. K.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Our Elizabeth Frontispiece

Henry and I looked at the Cookery Book

The Kid

A Bad Sign

Marion dropped fifteen stitches

Our Friend William

'Wot's 'orrible about it?'

'Oh, must I, Mama?'

"E was starin' at it wild-like.'

'Do you mean the boiler one?' I asked.

'I suppose I'm shocking you terribly.'

A slight lowering of the left eye-lid.

Henry, being a Scotsman, likes argument.

'A fair razzle-dazzle.'

She dashed from the room in a spasm of mirth.

'Am I not a suitable wife for Henry?'

'Carn't you get rid of 'er?'

'Stop, William!' Marion said.

'Oo ses the Signs is wrong?'

"Ere's to us, all of us!'

OUR ELIZABETH

CHAPTER I

If you ask Henry he will tell you that I cannot cook. In fact, he will tell you even if you don't ask. To hold up my culinary failures to ridicule is one of his newest forms of humour (new to Henry, I mean-the actual jokes you will have learned already at your grandmother's knee).

I had begun to see that I must either get a servant soon or a judicial separation from Henry. That was the stage at which I had arrived. Things were getting beyond me. By 'things' I mean the whole loathsome business of housework. My *métier* is to write-not that I am a great writer as yet, though I hope to be some day. What I never hope to be is a culinary expert. Should you command your cook to turn out a short story she could not suffer more in the agonies of composition than I do in making a simple Yorkshire pudding.

Henry does not like housework any more than I do; he says the performance of menial duties crushes his spirit-but he makes such a fuss about things. You might think, to hear him talk, that getting up coal, lighting fires, chopping wood and cleaning flues, knives and brasses were the entire work of a household instead of being mere incidents in the daily routine. If he had had to tackle my duties ... but men never understand how much there is to do in a house.

Even when they do lend a hand my experience is that they invariably manage to hurt themselves in some way. Henry seems incapable of getting up coal without dropping the largest knob on his foot. If he chops wood he gashes himself; he cannot go through the simple rite of pouring boiling water out of a saucepan without getting scalded; and when he mounts the steps to adjust the blinds I always keep the brandy uncorked in readiness; you see, he declares that a chap needs something to pull himself together after a fall from a step-ladder.

Perhaps you trace in all this a certain bitterness, a veiled antagonism on my part towards Henry; you may even imagine that we are a bickering sort of couple, constantly trying to get the better of each other. If so, you are mistaken. Up to six months before this story opens our married life had been ideal-for which reason I didn't open the story earlier. Ideal marriages (to any one except the contracting parties) are uninteresting affairs. It is such a pity that the good, the laudable, things in life generally are.

One of the reasons why our union was ideal (up to six months before this story opens) was that we shared identical tastes. Comradeship is the true basis of-but perhaps you have read my articles on the subject on the Woman's Page of the *Daily Trail*. I always advise girls to marry men of their own temperament. As a matter of fact, I expect they marry the men who are easiest to land, but you're not allowed to say things like that (on the Woman's Page). We have pure and noble ideals, we are tender, motherly and housewifely (on the Woman's Page).

Henry and I were of the same temperament. For one thing, we were equally incompetent at golf. Perhaps I fozzled my drive rather worse than Henry, but then he never took fewer than five strokes on the green, whereas I have occasionally done it in four. Then we mutually detested gramophones. But when we discovered that we could both play 'Caller Herrin' on the piano with one finger (entirely by ear) we felt that we were affinities, and got married shortly afterwards.

Stevenson once said, 'Marriage is not a bed of roses; it is a field of battle.' At the epoch of which I write Henry and I had not got to turning machine-guns on each other. At the most we only had diplomatic unpleasantnesses. The position, however, was getting strained. I realized quite clearly that if we didn't obtain domestic help of some sort very soon it might come to open hostilities. Isn't it surprising how the petty annoyances of life can wear away the strong bulwarks of trust and friendship formed by years of understanding? Our particular bulwarks were becoming quite shaky through nothing else but having to muddle through the dull sordid grind of cooking and housework by ourselves. We were getting disillusioned with each other. No 'jaundiced eye that casts discolouration' could look more jaundiced than Henry's when I asked him to dry up the dinner things.

Having explained all this, you will now understand something of my feelings when, on going to answer a knock at the door, I was confronted by a solid female who said she had been sent from the Registry Office. Oh, thrice blessed Registry Office that had answered my call.

'Come in,' I said eagerly, and, leading the way into the dining-room, I seated myself before her. With lowered eyes and modest mien I was, of course, waiting for her to speak first. I did not wait long. Her voice, concise and direct, rapped out: 'So you require a cook-general?'

'Yes-er-please,' I murmured. Under her searching gaze my knees trembled, my pulses throbbed, a slight perspiration broke out on my

forehead. My whole being seemed to centre itself in the mute inquiry: 'Shall I suit?'

There was a pause while the applicant placed her heavy guns. Then she opened fire immediately. 'I suppose you have outside daily help?'

'Er-no,' I confessed.

'Then you have a boy to do the windows, knives and boots?'

'No.'

'Do you send everything to the laundry?'

'Well ... no ... not quite.' I wanted to explain, to modify, to speak airily of woollens being 'just rubbed through,' but she hurried me forward.

'Have you a hot water circulator?'

'No.'

'A gas cooking-range?'

'No.'

It was terrible. I seemed to have nothing. I stood, as it were, naked to the world, bereft of a single inducement to hold out to the girl.

'Do you dine late?'

At this point, when I longed to answer 'No,' I was compelled to say 'Yes.' That decided her. She rose at once and moved towards the door. 'I'm afraid your situation won't do for me,' she remarked.

That was all she said. She was perfectly dignified about it. Much as she obviously condemned me, there was no noisy recrimination, no violent vituperative outburst on her part. I followed in her wake to the door. Even at the eleventh hour I hoped for a respite. 'Couldn't something be arranged?' I faltered as my gaze wandered hungrily over her capable-looking form. 'We might get you a gas-cooker-and all that.'

Do not condemn me. Remember that my will had been weakened by housework; six months of doing my own washing-up had brought me to my knees. I was ready to agree to any terms that were offered me. The applicant shook her head. There were too many obstacles in the way, too many radical changes necessary before the place could be made suitable for her. I realized finality in her answer, 'No, nothink,' and closing the front door behind her, I returned to the study to brood. I was still there, thinking

bitterly, the shadows of the evening creeping around me, when Henry came in.

'Hallo,' he said gruffly. 'No signs of dinner yet? Do you know the time?'

And only six months ago (before this story opens) he would have embraced me tenderly when he came in and said, 'How is the little wifie-pifie to-night? I hope it hasn't been worrying its fluffy little head with writing and making its hubby-wubby anxious?'

Perhaps you prefer Henry in the former role. Frankly, I did not. 'You needn't be so impatient,' I retorted. 'I expect you've gorged yourself on a good lunch in town. Anyhow, it won't take long to get dinner, as we're having tinned soup and eggs.'

'Oh, damn eggs,' said Henry. 'I'm sick of the sight of 'em.'

You can see for yourself how unrestrained we were getting. The thin veneer of civilization (thinner than ever when Henry is hungry) was fast wearing into holes. There was a pause, and then I coldly remarked: 'You didn't kiss me when you came in.'

It was a custom to which I was determined to cling with grim resolution. If I allowed his treatment of me to become too casual we might continue to drift apart even when we had some one to do the washing-up.

Henry came over to me and bestowed a labial salute. It is the only adequate description I can give of the performance. Then I went to the kitchen and got out the cookery-book.

It is a remarkable thing that I am never able to cook anything without the aid of the book. Even if I prepare the same dish seven times a week I must have the printed instructions constantly before me, or I am lost. This is especially strange, because I have a retentive memory for other things. My mind is crammed with odd facts retained from casual reading. If you asked me, the date of the Tai-ping Rebellion (though you're not likely to) I could tell you at once that it originated in 1850 and was not suppressed until 1864, for I remember reading about it in a dentist's waiting-room when I was fifteen. Yet although I prepared scrambled eggs one hundred times in six months (Henry said it was much oftener than that) I had to pore over the instructions as earnestly when doing my 'century' as on the first occasion.

The subsequent meal was taken in silence. The hay-fever from which I am prone to suffer at all seasons of the year was particularly persistent that

evening. A rising irritability, engendered by leathery eggs and fostered by Henry's expression, was taking possession of me. Quite suddenly I discovered that the way he held his knife annoyed me. Further, his manner of eating soup maddened me. But I restrained myself. I merely remarked: 'You have finished your soup, I *hear*, love.' We had not yet reached the stage of open rupture when I could exclaim: 'For goodness' sake stop swilling down soup like a grampus!' I have never heard a grampus take soup. But the expression seems picturesque.

Henry, too, had not quite lost his fortitude. My hay-fever was obviously annoying him, but he only commented: 'Don't you think you ought to go to a doctor-a really reliable man-with that distressing nasal complaint of yours, my dear?' I knew, however, that he was longing to bark out: 'Can't you do something to stop that everlasting sniffing? It's driving me mad, woman.'

How long would it be before we reached this stage of debacle? I brooded. Then the front door bell rang.

'You go,' I said to Henry.

'No, you go,' he replied. 'It looks bad for a man if he is master of the house to answer the door.'

I do not know why it should look bad for a man to answer his own door unless he is a bad man. But there are some things in our English social system which will ever remain unquestioned. I rose and went to open the front door. The light from the hall lamp fell dimly on a lank female form which stood on the doorstep. Out of the dusk a voice spoke to me. It said, 'I think you're wantin' a cook-general?'

I cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'I am.'

'Well, I'm Elizabeth Renshaw. You wrote to me. I got your letter sent on from the Registry Office along with ninety others. But I liked yours the best, so I thought there'd be no 'arm in coming to see--'

'Come in, Elizabeth,' I said earnestly. 'I'm glad you liked my letter.'

I began to wonder if I was not a great writer after all.

CHAPTER II

I piloted Elizabeth in and bade her be seated. Strangely enough, my usual hopeful expectations entirely deserted me at that moment. I felt that the interview would be fruitless. They say hope springs eternal in the human breast, but my breast didn't feel human just then. It was throbbing with savage and sanguinary thoughts. Perhaps it was the eggs. Many animals are rendered ferocious by an over-diet of meat. I can testify (so can Henry) that an over-diet of eggs has exactly the same effect on human beings. I think they stimulate the wrong kind of phagocytes. They can make the mildest and most forgiving person wild and vindictive. Henry always declares, when he reads of a man murdering his wife under exceptionally brutal circumstances, that she must have been giving him too many scrambled eggs. In fact, he wrote articles about it, entitled 'The Psychology of Diet,' in the Sunday papers, signed 'By a Physician.'

Henry is not a physician. Neither is he 'An Eminent Surgeon,' 'A Harley Street Expert,' an 'Ex-M.P.,' 'A Special Crime Investigator,' or 'A Well-known Bishop,' although he has written under all these pseudonyms. Do not blame Henry. In private life he seeks the truth as one who seeks the light, but by profession he is a journalist. Not being an expert in anything, he can write about everything-which is the true test of the born journalist.

But to return to Elizabeth. With the remembrance of the similar interview of only a few hours before still rankling in my mind, I looked at her a little austere. This time it was I who began the causerie.

'First of all I must tell you,' I said, 'that we have no hot water circulator.'

'Carn't abide them things,' commented Elizabeth; 'they bust sometimes and blows folks up.'

'We have no outside help,' I continued.

'An' a good thing, too. One place I was in the char 'elped 'erself to things an' it was me who was blamed fer it.'

'We have no gas-cooker.'

'Well, that's all right, then. Don't understand 'em. Give me a proper kitchen range, that's all I ask.'

I looked up hopefully. If all she asked for was a kitchen range I should be glad enough to give her a little thing like that. But the supreme test was yet to come. 'We don't send everything to the laundry,' I began.

'I 'ope you don't,' she broke in, 'leastways my clothes. The state they send 'em back, 'arf torn to ribbons. A girl never 'as 'er 'and out of 'er pocket buying new things. Besides, I like a bit o' washin'-makes a change, I always say.'

My heart began to beat so loudly with hope that I could hardly hear my own voice as I asked, 'How ... how soon can you come?'

'To-morrow, if you like,' she answered casually. 'I've 'ad a row with the friend I'm stayin' with and I can't abide living-in with folks I've fallen out with.'

I struggled to reconstruct this sentence and then, remembering what was required of me, I remarked, 'And your references?'

She gave me the address of her last place.

'Are they on the 'phone?' I questioned eagerly. 'If so, I'll settle the thing at once.' It seemed they were. I tottered to the telephone. My call was answered by a woman with a thin, sharp voice.

'I am sorry,' she said in answer to my query, 'I must refuse to answer any questions concerning Elizabeth Renshaw.'

'But you only need say "yes" or "no." Is she honest?'

'I am not in a position to give you a reply.'

'Am I to understand that she isn't sober?'

'I cannot answer that question.'

'Look here, she hasn't murdered any one, has she?'

'I am not in a position--'

'Oh, hang the woman,' I muttered, jerking up the receiver. But I felt the situation was an awkward one. What sinister and turbid happenings were connected with Elizabeth and her last place? I meditated. If she were not sober it was, after all, no business of mine so long as she got through her work. And if she didn't we should be no worse off than we were at present.

If she were dishonest it might be awkward, certainly, but then there was nothing of very much value in the house, Henry and I merely being writers

by profession. Most of our friends are writers, too, so we have not the usual array of massive silver wedding gifts about the place, but quite a lot of autograph photos and books instead. The value of these might not be apparent to the casual pilferer. My meditations got no further. I decided to lock up my silk stockings and best handkerchiefs and engage Elizabeth without delay. As a matter of fact, I afterwards discovered that her career had been blameless, while she had every foundation for her favourite declaration, 'I wouldn't take a used postage stamp, no, nor a rusty nail that wasn't my own.'

I do not condemn the woman I interviewed on the telephone, reprehensible as was her conduct. Perhaps she, too, was living on eggs and it had warped her better nature.

'I suppose you can cook all right?' I asked Elizabeth as ten minutes later, all arrangements made, I accompanied her to the door.

'Me? I'm a rare 'and at cookin'. My friend's 'usband ses 'e's never come across any one who can cook a steak like I can.'

'A steak,' I murmured ecstatically, 'richly brown with softly swelling curves-'

'Rather underdone in the middle,' supplemented Elizabeth, 'just a little bit o' fat, fairly crisp, a lump o' butter on the top, and I always 'old that a dash o' fried onion improves the flavour.'

'How beautiful,' I murmured again. It sounded like a poem. Swinburne or de Musset have never stirred me so deeply as did that simple recitation.

Elizabeth, seeing that she had an attentive audience, continued, 'Take roast pork, now. Well, I always say there's a lot in the cookin' o' that, with crisp cracklin', apple sauce an' stuffin'---'

'Don't go on,' I, broke in, feeling in my weakened state, unable to stand any more. Tears that men weep had risen to my eyes. 'Promise,' I said, taking her toil-worn hand, 'that you will come to-morrow.'

'Right-o,' said Elizabeth, and her lank form disappeared in the darkness. I staggered into the dining-room. Henry was sitting at the disordered dinner table jotting down notes. At any other time this would have irritated me, because I knew it was a preliminary to his remark that as he had an article to write which must be finished that evening he would not be able to help me with the washing-up. A hackneyed dodge of his. Oh, I could tell you a tale of the meanness of men.

'Henry, something has happened,' I began.

Without looking round he remarked, 'Don't disturb me. I must write up a brief biographical sketch of Courtenay Colville, the actor. He's been taken seriously ill and may be dead just in time for the morning papers.' In this way do journalists speak. To them life and death, all the tremendous happenings of the world-wars, revolutions, or even weddings of revue actresses-are just so much matter for printed and pictorial display. Do you think, if a great and honoured statesman dies, sub-editors care two pins about his public services? Not they. All they worry about is whether he is worth double-column headings, a long primer intro., and a line across the page.

'I didn't know Courtenay Colville was so ill,' I commented mildly. What I did know was that he was reported to have sprained his right toe at golf, and only an hour previously I should have commented caustically on Henry's description of this 'serious illness.' Now I came up to him and put my arm about his neck.

'I've just put on a clean collar-be careful,' he said, shaking off my hand.

'Henry, dear, I've landed a servant at last,' I breathed.

He looked up and, for a moment, I felt that I ought not to have told him so suddenly. But joy does not often kill. I went and knelt beside him. 'Dearest,' I whispered, 'it seems as though all the bitterness and misunderstanding between you and me is to be swept away at last. She can cook steaks, dear-juicy steaks, pork with crackling--'

'Sage and onion stuffing?' burst in a hoarse murmur from Henry.

'Yes, and large mutton chops, rich in fat--'

'Dearest, how splendid,' whispered Henry. Our lips met in ecstasy.

That evening was one of the happiest we have ever spent. Henry and I sat together on the divan and looked at the cookery-book. There was no doubt about it. Henry said, that Mrs. Beeton was a wonderful woman. We felt that she and Mr. Beeton must have been tremendously happy in their married life.

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