Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

opening extract from

Historical House: Lizzie's Wish

written by

Adele Geras

published by

Usborne Publishers

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

LIZZIE'S WISH

Chapter One

In which Lizzie Frazer prepares for a journey

Lizzie was packing her valise, ready for her visit to London. Even though she knew how much she would miss Mama, she was looking forward to the journey; to seeing her cousins again and to living for a time in the fine house in Chelsea about which she had heard so much, and which she was sure was a great deal larger than their cottage. Uncle Percy was the owner of a prosperous draper's shop, and the house, so Mama said, was decorated in the most up-to-date style. Uncle Percy was the richest of the three Frazer brothers, and Lizzie didn't mind that, but it had always struck her as somehow unjust that her beloved father should have been the one brother to die young. Uncle Percy was the eldest, and Uncle William was a soldier who had fought in the recent war in the Crimea, and both of them, in Lizzie's opinion, should therefore have been much more likely to leave this earth before their time than her papa, John Frazer.

He had died when Lizzie was only five, from a fever resulting from a bad chill, but even though seven years had passed since then, she remembered her father well, or thought she did. She could summon up memories of walking with him through the woods near their small house, where he would point at the plants and flowers, and tell her their names. If she shut her eyes, she could see a picture in her mind of herself, scarcely more than a baby, sitting on his broad shoulders and looking down at the world, with her head (that was what it felt like) almost touching the clouds.

More and more often lately, Lizzie needed to remind herself of those happy days. Her mother was now married to Mr. Eli Bright, a curate at the village church. He had moved into their cottage, not having a great deal of wealth of his own. Mama explained to Lizzie that now she was married to Mr. Bright, her money and possessions quite naturally became his. This seemed most unfair to Lizzie, and in her opinion Mama's new husband had turned their home into a chilly sort of place, where laughter was frowned on and every kind of comfort denied. Her mother scarcely ever played the piano as she used to, and the lamps seemed to glow with a far dimmer light than they had in the days when Papa was alive. How it was that her mother, Cecily Frazer, who was so lively, pretty and gentle, could find it in her heart to love someone as gloomy, strict and unfeeling as Eli Bright was beyond Lizzie's understanding, and she dared not ask, for fear of reminding Mama of everything she was missing.

She resolved not to think about such matters for the moment, but instead to look forward to her journey to London.

Lizzie had decided to take all three of her dresses with her. One was made of blue wool and had lace trimmings at the cuffs and collar. Another was brown serge; Lizzie thought it sadly plain and only suitable for school. Her Sunday dress was moss-green velvet and rather old. She hoped she would not grow too tall for it before it was quite worn out. She was also taking two white pinafores: the ones that had been mended less often than the others. She had chosen a book or two to accompany her on her travels and her Mother Goose Rhymes had a few precious flowers from the garden pressed between the pages.

Copyright © 2005 Adele Geras Published by Usborne

All her belongings were neatly laid out on the bed in her tiny bedroom, and Mama was helping her to fold everything and put it into the valise. Lizzie was enjoying this rare opportunity for private conversation with her mother. Mr. Bright (Lizzie refused to call him Father, and Eli, his Christian name, was too familiar) was always present and ready to overhear whatever they said to one another when they were downstairs. She knew that it was his idea that she should be sent away from home. Her mother was expecting a baby soon after Christmas, and Mr. Bright considered that Lizzie's departure would make life much easier for his wife.

"I wish I might be allowed to stay here in the country with you, Mama," Lizzie said. "I wish I didn't have to leave you alone with Mr. Bright. He doesn't seem very happy about the baby." She didn't say so to Mama, but she had noticed that since her mother had announced her pregnancy, Mr. Bright had taken to reading his Bible in private for hours at a time, and made even less effort to converse with them at mealtimes than he ever had.

"No, dear, you may be sure he is delighted. Eli is very anxious that I should be spared too much hard work. That is all."

Lizzie wanted to protest that her own presence in the cottage ought not to be called "hard work". Indeed, she was the one (since Annie, the maid, was rather slow and elderly) who helped her mother with the cooking and the laundry and the dusting of the few ornaments that Mr. Bright permitted them to display. It occurred to her also that if Eli Bright was delighted by anything, he had managed to hide it from everyone.

"Your Uncle Percy is kindness itself," Mama continued. "He has always been a good brother-in-law to me, and it's kind of him to offer you a home until after the baby is born. His new house is very grand, I believe, but quite full already. All three children still live at home, as well as your Grandmama Henrietta and Uncle William. To say nothing of Uncle Percy and Aunt Victoria themselves, of course. And the servants. You will be a crowd, there is no doubt of it. He's found room for you, Lizzie, and you must be aware of that kindness and be polite and helpful at all times…"

"I will, Mama. I promise. And I'll write to you, so that you may know about the fine sights which will be all around me in Chelsea."

Lizzie could see that her mother was blinking tears away from her eyes, and indeed, she herself was beginning to feel sad at the thought of leaving, so she changed the subject as quickly as she could.

"I must find room for this, Mama," she said, holding out a tin box which had once contained tea. She had tied string around it, as carefully as she could, so that it would not fly open while she was travelling.

"What have you got in there, child?" Mama asked. "I'm sure Uncle Percy has tea in plenty and you've no need to take such things with you."

"It's not tea," said Lizzie. "It's something else. It's private."

"Will you not tell me your secret? Otherwise, I might do nothing but wonder and wonder, after you've left us."

Copyright © 2005 Adele Geras Published by Usborne

“It’s a walnut in a flowerpot. I took one of the finest-looking nuts, still in its husk, from Mr. Alton’s tree when he was harvesting his walnuts and I’ve planted it in a small flowerpot. I’ve put the flowerpot into the tea-caddy and it must remain upright during the journey or the earth will fall out. I’ll look after it in London, never fear.”

“Oh, Lizzie, your papa used to do that…do you remember? Plant a walnut to make a new tree. How can you recall it when you were such a young child?”

Before Lizzie answered, she had to collect herself a little. All of a sudden she was overcome with sadness to think how much she would miss helping Mr. Alton with his trees. He had a large orchard that neighboured their own garden and he was always kind to Lizzie and told her all about the plants and flowers she loved so well.

“It came into my mind when I saw the husks lying on the ground. I wanted to take something with me from home. Something to remind me of the countryside. Mr. Alton gave me the flowerpot. He says I’m to keep it in a cold frame so that it may live through one hard frost before it’s ready to sprout. Do you think Uncle Percy has such a thing as a cold frame in his garden?”

“I’m sure I don’t know,” said Mama. “You’ll discover when you get to Chelsea Walk, no doubt. I’ll find you a small basket to put your walnut in, so that it may stay upright at all times.”

“Thank you, Mama,” said Lizzie, and she returned to the folding of her pinafores. She was determined to enjoy all that London had to offer and make Mama proud of her, but it was hard not to feel sad at the thought of leaving home.

Copyright © 2005 Adele Geras Published by Usborne