UNDERSTOOD BETSY

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY
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Uncle Henry looked at her, eyeing her sidewise over the top of one spectacle glass.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Betsy was staring down at her shoes, biting her lips and winking her eyes

CHAPTER I
AUNT HARRIET HAS A COUGH

When this story begins, Elizabeth Ann, who is the heroine of it, was a little girl of nine, who lived with her Great-aunt Harriet in a medium-sized city in a medium-sized State in the middle of this country; and that's all you need to know about the place, for it's not the important thing in the story; and anyhow you know all about it because it was probably very much like the place you live in yourself.

Elizabeth Ann's Great-aunt Harriet was a widow who was not very rich or very poor, and she had one daughter, Frances, who gave piano lessons to little girls. They kept a "girl" whose name was Grace and who had asthma dreadfully and wasn't very much of a "girl" at all, being nearer fifty than forty. Aunt Harriet, who was very tender-hearted, kept her chiefly because she couldn't get any other place on account of her coughing so you could hear her all over the house.

So now you know the names of all the household. And this is how they looked: Aunt Harriet was very small and thin and old, Grace was very small and thin and middle-aged, Aunt Frances (for Elizabeth Ann called her "Aunt," although she was really, of course, a first-cousin-once-removed) was small and thin and if the light wasn't too strong might be called young, and Elizabeth Ann was very small and thin and little. And yet they all had plenty to eat. I wonder what was the matter with them?

It was certainly not because they were not good, for no womenkind in all the world had kinder hearts than they. You have heard how Aunt Harriet kept Grace (in spite of the fact that she was a very depressing person) on account of her asthma; and when Elizabeth Ann's father and mother both died when she was a baby, although there were many other cousins and uncles and aunts in the family, these two women fairly rushed upon the little baby-orphan, taking her home and surrounding her henceforth with the most loving devotion.

They had said to themselves that it was their manifest duty to save the dear little thing from the other relatives, who had no idea about

how to bring up a sensitive, impressionable child, and they were sure, from the way Elizabeth Ann looked at six months, that she was going to be a sensitive, impressionable child. It is possible also that they were a little bored with their empty life in their rather forlorn, little brick house in the medium-sized city, and that they welcomed the occupation and new interests which a child would bring in.

But they thought that they chiefly desired to save dear Edward's child from the other kin, especially from the Putney cousins, who had written down from their Vermont farm that they would be glad to take the little girl into their family. But "*anything* but the Putneys!" said Aunt Harriet, a great many times. They were related only by marriage to her, and she had her own opinion of them as a stiffnecked, cold-hearted, undemonstrative, and hard set of New Englanders. "I boarded near them one summer when you were a baby, Frances, and I shall never forget the way they were treating some children visiting there! ... Oh, no, I don't mean they abused them or beat them ... but such lack of sympathy, such perfect indifference to the sacred sensitiveness of child-life, such a starving of the child-heart ... No, I shall never forget it! They had chores to do ... as though they had been hired men!"

Aunt Harriet never meant to say any of this when Elizabeth Ann could hear, but the little girl's ears were as sharp as little girls' ears always are, and long before she was nine she knew all about the opinion Aunt Harriet had of the Putneys. She did not know, to be sure, what "chores" were, but she took it confidently from Aunt Harriet's voice that they were something very, very dreadful.

There was certainly neither coldness nor hardness in the way Aunt Harriet and Aunt Frances treated Elizabeth Ann. They had really given themselves up to the new responsibility, especially Aunt Frances, who was very conscientious about everything. As soon as the baby came there to live, Aunt Frances stopped reading novels and magazines, and re-read one book after another which told her how to bring up children. And she joined a Mothers' Club which met once a week. And she took a correspondence course in mothercraft from a school in Chicago which teaches that business by mail. So you can see that by the time Elizabeth Ann was nine years old Aunt Frances must have known all that anybody can know about how to bring up children. And Elizabeth Ann got the benefit of it all.

She and her Aunt Frances were simply inseparable. Aunt Frances shared in all Elizabeth Ann's doings and even in all her thoughts. She was especially anxious to share all the little girl's thoughts, because she felt that the trouble with most children is that they are not understood, and she was determined that she would thoroughly understand Elizabeth Ann down to the bottom of her little mind. Aunt Frances (down in the bottom of her own mind) thought that her mother had never *really* understood her, and she meant to do better by Elizabeth Ann. She also loved the little girl with all her heart, and longed, above everything in the world, to protect her from all harm and to keep her happy and strong and well.

And yet Elizabeth Ann was neither very strong nor well. And as to her being happy, you can judge for yourself when you have read all this story. She was very small for her age, with a rather pale face and big dark eyes which had in them a frightened, wistful expression that went to Aunt Frances's tender heart and made her ache to take care of Elizabeth Ann better and better.

Aunt Frances was afraid of a great many things herself, and she knew how to sympathize with timidity. She was always quick to reassure the little girl with all her might and main whenever there was anything to fear. When they were out walking (Aunt Frances took her out for a walk up one block and down another every single day, no matter how tired the music lessons had made her), the aunt's eyes were always on the alert to avoid anything which might frighten Elizabeth Ann. If a big dog trotted by, Aunt Frances always said, hastily: "There, there, dear! That's a *nice* doggie, I'm sure. I don't believe he ever bites little girls. ... *mercy*! Elizabeth Ann, don't go near him! ... Here, darling, just get on the other side of Aunt Frances if he scares you so" (by that time Elizabeth Ann was always pretty well scared), "and perhaps we'd better just turn this corner and walk in the other direction." If by any chance the dog went in that direction too, Aunt Frances became a prodigy of valiant protection, putting the shivering little girl behind her, threatening the animal with her umbrella, and saying in a trembling voice, "Go away, sir! Go *away*!"

Or if it thundered and lightened, Aunt Frances always dropped everything she might be doing and held Elizabeth Ann tightly in her arms until it was all over. And at night—Elizabeth Ann did not sleep very well—when the little girl woke up screaming with a bad dream, it was always dear Aunt Frances who came to her bedside, a warm

wrapper over her nightgown so that she need not hurry back to her own room, a candle lighting up her tired, kind face. She always took the little girl into her thin arms and held her close against her thin breast. "*Tell* Aunt Frances all about your naughty dream, darling," she would murmur, "so's to get it off your mind!"

She had read in her books that you can tell a great deal about children's inner lives by analyzing their dreams, and besides, if she did not urge Elizabeth Ann to tell it, she was afraid the sensitive, nervous little thing would "lie awake and brood over it." This was the phrase she always used the next day to her mother when Aunt Harriet exclaimed about her paleness and the dark rings under her eyes. So she listened patiently while the little girl told her all about the fearful dreams she had, the great dogs with huge red mouths that ran after her, the Indians who scalped her, her schoolhouse on fire so that she had to jump from a third-story window and was all broken to bits—once in a while Elizabeth Ann got so interested in all this that she went on and made up more awful things even than she had dreamed, and told long stories which showed her to be a child of great imagination. But all these dreams and continuations of dreams Aunt Frances wrote down the first thing the next morning, and, with frequent references to a thick book full of hard words, she tried her best to puzzle out from them exactly what kind of little girl Elizabeth Ann really was.

There was one dream, however, that even conscientious Aunt Frances never tried to analyze, because it was too sad. Elizabeth Ann dreamed sometimes that she was dead and lay in a little white coffin with white roses over her. Oh, that made Aunt Frances cry, and so did Elizabeth Ann. It was very touching. Then, after a long, long time of talk and tears and sobs and hugs, the little girl would begin to get drowsy, and Aunt Frances would rock her to sleep in her arms, and lay her down ever so quietly, and slip away to try to get a little nap herself before it was time to get up.

At a quarter of nine every weekday morning Aunt Frances dropped whatever else she was doing, took Elizabeth Ann's little, thin, white hand protectingly in hers, and led her through the busy streets to the big brick school-building where the little girl had always gone to school. It was four stories high, and when all the classes were in session there were six hundred children under that one roof. You can imagine, perhaps, the noise there was on the playground just before school! Elizabeth Ann shrank from it with all her soul, and

clung more tightly than ever to Aunt Frances's hand as she was led along through the crowded, shrieking masses of children. Oh, how glad she was that she had Aunt Frances there to take care of her, though as a matter of fact nobody noticed the little thin girl at all, and her very own classmates would hardly have known whether she came to school or not. Aunt Frances took her safely through the ordeal of the playground, then up the long, broad stairs, and pigeonholed her carefully in her own schoolroom. She was in the third grade,—3A, you understand, which is almost the fourth.

Then at noon Aunt Frances was waiting there, a patient, never-failing figure, to walk home with her little charge; and in the afternoon the same thing happened over again. On the way to and from school they talked about what had happened in the class. Aunt Frances believed in sympathizing with a child's life, so she always asked about every little thing, and remembered to inquire about the continuation of every episode, and sympathized with all her heart over the failure in mental arithmetic, and triumphed over Elizabeth Ann's beating the Schmidt girl in spelling, and was indignant over the teacher's having pets. Sometimes in telling over some very dreadful failure or disappointment Elizabeth Ann would get so wrought up that she would cry. This always brought the ready tears to Aunt Frances's kind eyes, and with many soothing words and nervous, tremulous caresses she tried to make life easier for poor little Elizabeth Ann. The days when they had cried they could neither of them eat much luncheon.

After school and on Saturdays there was always the daily walk, and there were lessons, all kinds of lessons—piano-lessons of course, and nature-study lessons out of an excellent book Aunt Frances had bought, and painting lessons, and sewing lessons, and even a little French, although Aunt Frances was not very sure about her own pronunciation. She wanted to give the little girl every possible advantage, you see. They were really inseparable. Elizabeth Ann once said to some ladies calling on her aunts that whenever anything happened in school, the first thing she thought of was what Aunt Frances would think of it.

"Why is that?" they asked, looking at Aunt Frances, who was blushing with pleasure.

"Oh, she is so interested in my school work! And she *understands* me!" said Elizabeth Ann, repeating the phrases she had heard so often.

Aunt Frances's eyes filled with happy tears. She called Elizabeth Ann to her and kissed her and gave her as big a hug as her thin arms could manage. Elizabeth Ann was growing tall very fast. One of the visiting ladies said that before long she would be as big as her auntie, and a troublesome young lady. Aunt Frances said: "I have had her from the time she was a little baby and there has scarcely been an hour she has been out of my sight. I'll always have her confidence. You'll always tell Aunt Frances *everything*, won't you, darling?" Elizabeth Ann resolved to do this always, even if, as now, she often had to invent things to tell.

Aunt Frances went on, to the callers: "But I do wish she weren't so thin and pale and nervous. I suppose it is the exciting modern life that is so bad for children. I try to see that she has plenty of fresh air. I go out with her for a walk every single day. But we have taken all the walks around here so often that we're rather tired of them. It's often hard to know how to get her out enough. I think I'll have to get the doctor to come and see her and perhaps give her a tonic." To Elizabeth Ann she added, hastily: "Now don't go getting notions in your head, darling. Aunt Frances doesn't think there's anything *very* much the matter with you. You'll be all right again soon if you just take the doctor's medicine nicely. Aunt Frances will take care of her precious little girl. *She*ll make the bad sickness go away." Elizabeth Ann, who had not known before that she was sick, had a picture of herself lying in the little white coffin, all covered over with white. ... In a few minutes Aunt Frances was obliged to excuse herself from her callers and devote herself entirely to taking care of Elizabeth Ann.

So one day, after this had happened several times, Aunt Frances really did send for the doctor, who came briskly in, just as Elizabeth Ann had always seen him, with his little square black bag smelling of leather, his sharp eyes, and the air of bored impatience which he always wore in that house. Elizabeth Ann was terribly afraid to see him, for she felt in her bones he would say she had galloping consumption and would die before the leaves cast a shadow. This was a phrase she had picked up from Grace, whose conversation, perhaps on account of her asthma, was full of references to early graves and quick declines.

And yet—did you ever hear of such a case before?—although Elizabeth Ann when she first stood up before the doctor had been quaking with fear lest he discover some deadly disease in her, she was very much hurt indeed when, after thumping her and looking at her lower eyelid inside out, and listening to her breathing, he pushed her away with a little jerk and said: "There's nothing in the world the matter with that child. She's as sound as a nut! What she needs is ..."—he looked for a moment at Aunt Frances's thin, anxious face, with the eyebrows drawn together in a knot of conscientiousness, and then he looked at Aunt Harriet's thin, anxious face with the eyebrows drawn up that very same way, and then he glanced at Grace's thin, anxious face peering from the door waiting for his verdict—and then he drew a long breath, shut his lips and his little black case very tightly, and did not go on to say what it was that Elizabeth Ann needed.

Of course Aunt Frances didn't let him off as easily as that, you may be sure. She fluttered around him as he tried to go, and she said all sorts of fluttery things to him, like "But, Doctor, she hasn't gained a pound in three months ... and her sleep ... and her appetite ... and her nerves ..."

Elizabeth Ann stood up before the doctor.

The doctor said back to her, as he put on his hat, all the things doctors always say under such conditions: "More beefsteak ... plenty of fresh air ... more sleep ... *She*ll be all right ..." but his voice did not sound as though he thought what he was saying amounted to much. Nor did Elizabeth Ann. She had hoped for some spectacular red pills to be taken every half-hour, like those Grace's doctor gave her whenever she felt low in her mind.

And just then something happened which changed Elizabeth Ann's life forever and ever. It was a very small thing, too. Aunt Harriet coughed. Elizabeth Ann did not think it at all a bad-sounding cough in comparison with Grace's hollow whoop; Aunt Harriet had been coughing like that ever since the cold weather set in, for three or four months now, and nobody had thought anything of it, because they were all so much occupied in taking care of the sensitive, nervous little girl who needed so much care.

And yet, at the sound of that little discreet cough behind Aunt Harriet's hand, the doctor whirled around and fixed his sharp eyes on her, with all the bored, impatient look gone, the first time Elizabeth Ann had ever seen him look interested. "What's that? What's that?" he said, going over quickly to Aunt Harriet. He snatched out of his little bag a shiny thing with two rubber tubes attached, and he put the ends of the tubes in his ears and the shiny thing up against Aunt Harriet, who was saying, "It's nothing, Doctor ... a little teasing cough I've had this winter. And I meant to tell you, too, but I forgot it, that that sore spot on my lungs doesn't go away as it ought to."

The doctor motioned her very impolitely to stop talking, and listened very hard through his little tubes. Then he turned around and looked at Aunt Frances as though he were angry at her. He said, "Take the child away and then come back here yourself."

And that was almost all that Elizabeth Ann ever knew of the forces which swept her away from the life which had always gone on, revolving about her small person, exactly the same ever since she could remember.

You have heard so much about tears in the account of Elizabeth Ann's life so far that I won't tell you much about the few days which followed, as the family talked over and hurriedly prepared to obey the doctor's verdict, which was that Aunt Harriet was very, very sick

and must go away at once to a warm climate, and Aunt Frances must go, too, but not Elizabeth Ann, for Aunt Frances would need to give all her time to taking care of Aunt Harriet. And anyhow the doctor didn't think it best, either for Aunt Harriet or for Elizabeth Ann, to have them in the same house.

Grace couldn't go of course, but to everybody's surprise she said she didn't mind, because she had a bachelor brother, who kept a grocery store, who had been wanting her for years to go and keep house for him. She said she had stayed on just out of conscientiousness because she knew Aunt Harriet couldn't get along without her! And if you notice, that's the way things often happen to very, very conscientious people.

Elizabeth Ann, however, had no grocer brother. She had, it is true, a great many relatives, and of course it was settled she should go to some of them till Aunt Frances could take her back. For the time being, just now, while everything was so distracted and confused, she was to go to stay with the Lathrop cousins, who lived in the same city, although it was very evident that the Lathrops were not perfectly crazy with delight over the prospect.

Still, something had to be done at once, and Aunt Frances was so frantic with the packing up, and the moving men coming to take the furniture to storage, and her anxiety over her mother—she had switched to Aunt Harriet, you see, all the conscientiousness she had lavished on Elizabeth Ann—nothing much could be extracted from her about Elizabeth Ann. "Just keep her for the present, Molly!" she said to Cousin Molly Lathrop. "I'll do something soon. I'll write you. I'll make another arrangement ... but just *now*...."

Her voice was quavering on the edge of tears, and Cousin Molly Lathrop, who hated scenes, said hastily, "Yes, oh, yes, of course. For the present ..." and went away, thinking that she didn't see why she should have *all* the disagreeable things to do. When she had her husband's tyrannical old mother to take care of, wasn't that enough, without adding to the household such a nervous, spoiled, morbid young one as Elizabeth Ann!

Elizabeth Ann did not of course for a moment dream that Cousin Molly was thinking any such things about her, but she could not help seeing that Cousin Molly was not any too enthusiastic about taking her in; and she was already feeling terribly forlorn about the

sudden, unexpected change in Aunt Frances, who had been *so* wrapped up in her and now was just as much wrapped up in Aunt Harriet. Do you know, I am sorry for Elizabeth Ann, and, what's more, I have been ever since this story began.

Well, since I promised you that I was not going to tell about more tears, I won't say a single word about the day when the two aunts went away on the train, for there is nothing much but tears to tell about, except perhaps an absent look in Aunt Frances's eyes which hurt the little girl's feelings dreadfully.

And then Cousin Molly took the hand of the sobbing little girl and led her back to the Lathrop house. But if you think you are now going to hear about the Lathrops, you are quite mistaken, for just at this moment old Mrs. Lathrop took a hand in the matter. She was Cousin Molly's husband's mother, and, of course, no relation at all to Elizabeth Ann, and so was less enthusiastic than anybody else. All that Elizabeth Ann ever saw of this old lady, who now turned the current of her life again, was her head, sticking out of a second-story window; and that's all that you need to know about her, either. It was a very much agitated old head, and it bobbed and shook with the intensity with which the imperative old voice called upon Cousin Molly and Elizabeth Ann to stop right there where they were on the front walk.

"The doctor says that what's the matter with Bridget is scarlet fever, and we've all got to be quarantined. There's no earthly sense bringing that child in to be sick and have it, and be nursed, and make the quarantine twice as long!"

"But, Mother!" called Cousin Molly, "I can't leave the child in the middle of the street!"

Elizabeth Ann was actually glad to hear her say that, because she was feeling so awfully unwanted, which is, if you think of it, not a very cheerful feeling for a little girl who has been the hub round which a whole household was revolving.

"You don't *have* to!" shouted old Mrs. Lathrop out of her second-story window. Although she did not add "You gump!" aloud, you could feel she was meaning just that. "You don't have to! You can just send her to the Putney cousins. All nonsense about her not going there in the first place. They invited her the minute they heard of Harriet's being so bad. They're the natural ones to take her in.

Abigail is her mother's own aunt, and Ann is her own first-cousin-once-removed ... just as close as Harriet and Frances are, and *much* closer than you! And on a farm and all ... just the place for her!"

"But how under the sun, Mother!" shouted Cousin Molly back, "can I *get* her to the Putneys'? You can't send a child of nine a thousand miles without ..."

Old Mrs. Lathrop looked again as though she were saying "You gump!" and said aloud, "Why, there's James, going to New York on business in a few days anyhow. He can just go now, and take her along and put her on the right train at Albany. If he wires from here, they'll meet her in Hillsboro."

And that was just what happened. Perhaps you may have guessed by this time that when old Mrs. Lathrop issued orders they were usually obeyed. As to who the Bridget was who had the scarlet fever, I know no more than you. I take it, from the name, she was the cook. Unless, indeed, old Mrs. Lathrop made her up for the occasion, which I think she would have been quite capable of doing, don't you?

At any rate, with no more ifs or ands, Elizabeth Ann's satchel was packed, and Cousin James Lathrop's satchel was packed, and the two set off together, the big, portly, middle-aged man quite as much afraid of his mother as Elizabeth Ann was. But he was going to New York, and it is conceivable that he thought once or twice on the trip that there were good times in New York as well as business engagements, whereas poor Elizabeth Ann was being sent straight to the one place in the world where there were no good times at all. Aunt Harriet had said so, ever so many times. Poor Elizabeth Ann!

CHAPTER II
BETSY 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 would *not* go there! Besides, she had a sinking notion that perhaps they wouldn't pay any attention to her if she did. The world had 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! 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 brown bare fields, its brown bare 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 elders say about her so many times that she could not stand the cold, that she shivered at the very thought of cold weather, and certainly nothing could look colder than that bleak country into which the train was now 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?" said a passenger to the conductor.

"You bet!" 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 white, 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 old man in a fur cap and heavy coat stood by a lumber wagon.

"This is her, Mr. Putney," said the conductor, touching his cap, and went back to the train, which went away shrieking for a nearby crossing and setting the echoes ringing from one mountain to another.

There was Elizabeth Ann alone with her much-feared Great-uncle Henry. He nodded to her, and drew out from the bottom of the wagon a warm, large cape, which he slipped over her shoulders. "The women folks were afraid you'd git cold drivin'," 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."

She sat very still on the high lumber seat, feeling very forlorn and neglected. Her 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 dreams. Oh, why wasn't Aunt Frances there to take care of her! It was just like one of her bad dreams—yes, it was horrible! She would fall, she would roll under the wheels and be crushed to ... She looked up at Uncle Henry with the wild, strained 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 old face quite unmoved. "Here, you drive, will you, for a piece?" he said briefly, putting the reins into her hands, hooking his spectacles over his ears, and drawing out a stubby pencil and a bit of paper. "I've got some figgering to do. You pull on the left-hand rein to make 'em go to the left and t'other way for t'other way, though 'tain't likely we'll meet any teams."

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 the explanation, her conversations with Aunt Frances having made her very fluent in explanations 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